

god has spoken

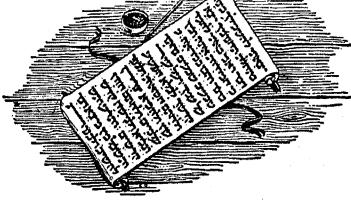
An Introduction to the Old Testament
for Young People



god has spoken

AN INTRODUCTION
TO THE OLD TESTAMENT
FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

By David Noel Freedman and James D. Smart

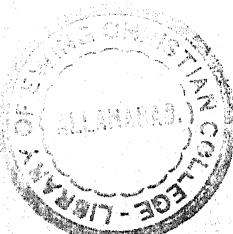


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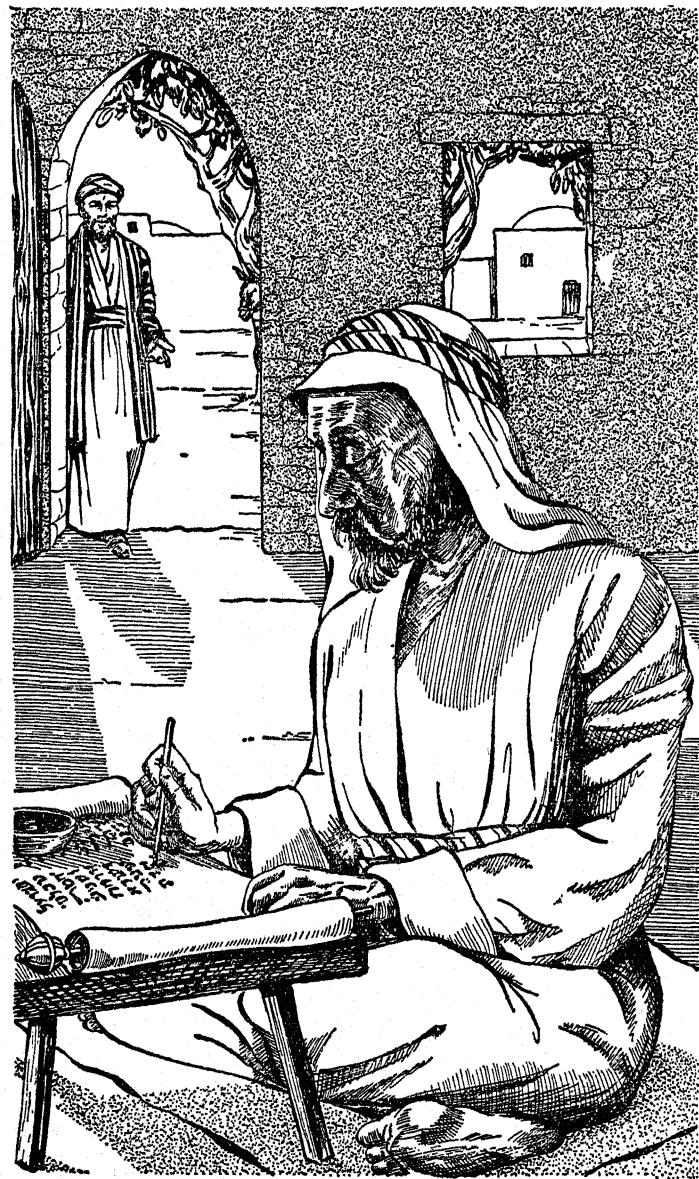
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PART ONE

how god speaks

God Speaks to You

How the Old Testament Was Written



~~~~~ CHAPTER 1 ~~~~

## god speaks to you

**H**RE you telling me that the Church expects me to read the Old Testament?" Young people ask that question—and older people also. The frank answer is, "Yes, the Church expects this of you." And it has good reason.

### YOUR QUEST FOR CERTAINTY

You want to live a full and satisfying life. To do this you need guidance, the best guidance you can find. Where, then, are you to seek it? There is so much to know, and there are so many different kinds of knowledge! In the daily news and periodicals, over the radio and television, on motion-picture screens, in thousands of books, in high-school and college courses, and in intimate discussions with friends, you are constantly being bombarded with facts.

But there are so many conflicting opinions, especially concerning the things that are most important. Man today possesses such a variety of knowledge, and yet is so uncertain as to what this knowledge means, and how to use it in directing his actions toward a better life. There are also so many questions that remain unanswered. What, then, are you to think? What are you to do? Is there any source of sure guidance in the most important matters of life?

Whence do I come? Why am I here? Where am I going? What is my place in the total scheme of things? How am I to find the good life? These are inescapable questions, and you must give some answer to them. In fact, you must have

true answers to these questions if you are to use wisely all the other knowledge that comes to you. And yet, search as you will through the fund of human knowledge, you will not find satisfactory answers.

The Christian faith claims to meet this very need. It claims that only God can give you the answers you need to hear. God made you in such a way that you cannot find your true life except in fellowship with him. You cannot be truly alive until his Spirit is alive in you. You cannot be at peace within yourself until you have made your peace with him. You cannot know the truth until you know the God who alone is truth. What you need therefore is not just to be given answers to your questions but to be taken into fellowship with God himself.

But what has this to do with your reading the Old Testament? First and foremost the Church says that in Jesus Christ, in his life and death and resurrection, God opens to you the only perfect way into fellowship with himself. But it also says that you must read the story of Jesus Christ against the background of the Old Testament if you are to understand it aright. The word which God speaks to you comes through *both* the Old and the New Testament. In both of them God is revealing himself to men and establishing fellowship with them. Here, then, is where you must search, and search diligently, if you are to find the knowledge and the guidance which are more important than all else in life.

#### CAN GOD SPEAK THROUGH ANCIENT BOOKS?

You may feel that the Old Testament belongs to a world that is very strange and far away. This is the twentieth century; and most of the Old Testament was completed three hundred years before Jesus was born! The writers all belonged to another age than ours and another continent halfway across the world. They wrote of people far removed

from modern life who knew nothing of an industrial civilization, but counted their wealth in flocks and herds. How can such ancient books speak to you of God?

By way of beginning, consider this: The men and women of the Old Testament are ordinary human beings like yourself. Do not be led astray by the fact that a man wears a sheet or a gown instead of a coat and trousers, or speaks a strange language, or eats with his fingers, or has a number of wives, or has never seen a clock. You must not have the notion that only twentieth-century Americans are normal and that all who live elsewhere or at some other time are a little peculiar. The people of the Old Testament had much the same problems, temptations, failures, and successes that you have. Human nature is always and everywhere much the same.

As you associate with the men and women of the Old Testament, you will find yourself again and again thinking that the people you know are very much like them: Abraham leaving his old home to seek a truer life; Lot choosing the best grazing lands for his cattle and disregarding the debt he owed to Abraham, his uncle; Esau despising his birth-right and willing to exchange it for a mouthful of food; Joseph loyal to a group of jealous brothers; Moses shrinking from the responsibilities of leadership; Ruth quietly performing hard duties; Saul becoming headstrong as he obtained more power; David, a good man, yielding to lust and to a spirit of vengeance; the three warriors of David crossing the hostile Philistine lines at the risk of their lives to satisfy their king's desire for a drink of water; Solomon as a young man in a hard position earnestly asking God for wisdom; Elijah and Jeremiah sometimes becoming despondent under the pressure of great difficulties, at other times facing danger with heroic courage. These Old Testament characters, and scores of others, are very much like what you are, or wish to be, or fear you may become. As you read the Old Testament you will discover your kinship with these

people and thus you will learn much about the nature of your own thoughts and desires.

## GOD'S SEARCHLIGHT ON MAN

There are many other ancient records of human experience. Why, then, does the Christian faith ascribe to the Old Testament a unique significance? Here you begin to approach the heart of the matter. The Christian Church holds that the Old Testament and the New are a record of God's dealings with men and that the Bible expresses God's mind concerning these men and their actions. They are seen under the searching light of God's presence and God's purpose.

You can see this clearly in the story of the anointing of David by Samuel (I Sam. 16: 1-3). God has sent his prophet Samuel to the family of Jesse, the Bethlehemite, to anoint one of his sons to be king in place of Saul, who as king of God's people has failed to carry out God's will. When Samuel is impressed by Eliab, Jesse's oldest son, God tells Samuel,

"I have refused him: . . . the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart."

Samuel is led to anoint David, the youngest son, who is called in from keeping the sheep. Here what counts is not what men think of themselves, but what God thinks of them. Because the Old Testament was written from this viewpoint, you will find in it a more profound understanding of human nature than you find anywhere else.

## GOD REVEALS HIMSELF

There is another step to be taken if you are to understand the Church's faith concerning the Old Testament.

The chief character in the Bible is God. The Bible is a record of God's dealings with men—how he makes himself known to men, reveals his will for them, invites them into his presence, and binds them to him with the cords of love and mercy. Thus as you read The Book of Jeremiah you see God at work, not only in the prophet's life, but in the life of the nation and of the world. The psalmists lay bare to you the inmost secrets of their souls and tell you what God meant to them. Everywhere you turn in the Old Testament you find the same God at work in men's lives. He is at the center of all life and he has a purpose which he is carrying through. Then as you open the New Testament you see this purpose carried to its triumphant fulfillment in Jesus Christ. This is what binds the Old and New Testaments together as parts of one whole: that together they bear witness to God's great work of redemption, and show you what God has done and what God is doing for your salvation.

What God is doing! The reading of the Scripture should open your eyes to see what God is doing in *your* life and in *your* nation's life and in *your* world. You never rightly hear what God said to Israel through the prophets until you hear what he says to *you* through them. God has spoken! The whole Bible bears witness that that is true. But it means little if it is all a thing of the past. The discovery you must make is that God speaks! Through the Scriptures he still speaks to you, makes known to you who he is and what he is like, shows you what he is doing in the world today, and comes into your life as the God of your salvation.

#### GOD'S SPIRIT SPEAKS TO YOU

How does reading the Old Testament enable you to hear God speaking to you? The answer given by the Christian faith is this: "Our God is a living God. The same Spirit of God that gave understanding and vision to the prophets

can dwell in us to take away our blindness and confusion. God's purposes have not changed. He is seeking at every moment to draw us into fellowship with him." Therefore, if you will come to this record of God's dealings with men of old believing that through it God may begin to deal decisively with you, and having within your heart an earnest desire to know God, his Holy Spirit will speak through the words of Scripture to the deepest needs of your life.

This is the Church's faith. It testifies that through the years this has been the experience of those who have sought to hear God's word. There is no other way for you to be certain that it is true than to have it come true in your own experience. Try it for yourself. Only do not be too easily discouraged. Remember the words found in Jer. 29: 13:

"And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart."

As you find what God has to say to you in the Old Testament it will not be hard to understand why the Old Testament is bound up with the New as a part of the Christian's Bible.

## how the old testament WAS WRITTEN

**O**NCE upon a time there was no Old Testament—not a line of it. Now we have it in full. How did it start? How did it grow? What is the story behind its production?

One thing is certain: it was not written in the order in which we now have it. The writing of the Old Testament took over a thousand years, and most of the authors are not known to us by name. But by careful study scholars have been able to find out with reasonable accuracy the order in which the various parts of the Bible were written, and it is often possible for them to describe the period in which a particular book was written. This has added greatly to the understanding of the literature. It has also made it possible to tell the story of how the Bible came to be.

### LIVING COMES BEFORE WRITING

You must keep in mind that there were different stages in the writing of any book. The Book of Jeremiah will serve as an example. First of all, Jeremiah heard a word from God which other men were not hearing. It gave to him an understanding not only of the events of the time but also of what choices the nation must make in relation to these events. He then confronted his people in various ways with the word of God that had come to him. The second stage was reached when the prophet himself or his secretary

Baruch set down in writing the words of a sermon or the account of an incident in the life of the prophet. The third stage began after the prophet's death when the records concerning him were gathered together, revised somewhat, and set down in a single scroll, no serious attempt being made to put them in chronological order. The fourth stage came centuries later when a scroll which contained the writings of a single prophet was placed together with the writings of the other prophets and recognized as part of the sacred scriptures of Israel.

With a book such as Genesis the various stages are not so clearly visible. The stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will serve here as an example. Far back in the second millennium B.C., there was a man named Abraham who "heard" God and obeyed him. He not only came to know the one true God, but he learned what a difference it made in the whole of life to serve that God rather than to serve many gods as other men did. But, so far as we know, Abraham wrote no autobiography; neither did his son, Isaac, nor his grandson, Jacob, nor his great-grandson, Joseph. Yet stories of this family and of God's dealings with them remained in the minds of those who came after and were told and retold for centuries around the campfires. The stories, with their constant retelling, took on an artistic perfection that comes only from long and loving retouching and polishing. There came a day, however, when the stories were set down in writing. Men, who knew how great an influence was exerted on the minds of the people by these stories of Israel's early days, put into writing a version of them which would be highly effective in instructing the people concerning God's ways with them. This was done in the Southern Kingdom of Judah and in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, both of which claimed Abraham and his family as their ancestors. Thus there were two somewhat different stories of the patriarchs

committed to writing. But after 721 B.C., when the Northern Kingdom was destroyed and Judah was left to carry on alone, the writings from both kingdoms were gathered into one body of literature and these two stories of Abraham were fitted together into a single story by an editor. It can be seen, therefore, that the book of Genesis was not written at one time by one man but rather that into it were poured the devotion and the understanding of many men of faith through many centuries of Israel's history.

#### THE STORY BEHIND THE BIBLE

The story of the Bible begins, thus, in days when Israel was not yet a nation. God chose first a man and then a family, that through them and those who would follow after them he might make himself known in his saving power to all the earth. Before there was any sacred book, or even one word in writing, there was a revelation of God which had come to men and a remembrance of it which was being passed on from generation to generation.

The next decisive step in the story was God's redemption of the Children of Israel out of the deadly slavery of Egypt. Again there was a man, Moses, to whom God made himself known and through whom a new understanding of his will was brought to the people. The events of the exodus from Egypt are supremely important, however, for through them the Israelites were convinced of the power and purpose of the God into whose allegiance Moses called them. They were to look back for all time upon these "saving acts of God" through which they were delivered from what seemed certain destruction and were given a unique destiny as a nation. Then, at Sinai, they entered into a covenant with God, which was to be the foundation of the nation's life for all the future, and the laws were received by Moses which made clear what was expected of Israelites if they

were to live worthily as a people in covenant with God.

There were undoubtedly some written records from the time of Moses, but we have no clear references to them apart from the tablets on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed. The story of what had happened was repeated over and over and was passed down from one generation to another by word of mouth. Knowledge of the God of their fathers came to Israelites in those days through a spoken word rather than through a written word, but it was not less powerful for that reason.

The ages of turmoil following the Israelite invasion of Canaan produced heroic deeds and a fund of stories concerning the exploits of such men as Joshua, Gideon, and others, but it is not likely that as yet much was done in the way of writing. That was to come later with the secure establishment of the kingdom under Saul and David. Court records began then to be kept and collections were made of the stories from the earlier times. Most likely there were also some written accounts of happenings kept by the priests and by the prophets. The story of Nathan and David in II Sam., ch. 12, has an eyewitness quality which suggests that perhaps it was set down by the prophet Nathan himself.

#### RECORDS WRITTEN AND EDITED

After the death of Solomon and the division of the kingdom into Israel and Judah, the gathering together of traditions from the past took more definite form. In Judah about 850 B.C. a story was set down which began with the Creation and continued through the times of the patriarchs down to the Exodus and the conquest of Canaan. Nearly a century later a similar but also somewhat different account was written in Israel. These documents were later joined into one, but in such a way that both were usually kept

unchanged, and parallel accounts of the same incident may therefore be found side by side.

About 750 B.C. a new and very important kind of writing had its beginning in Israel. The prophets began to make a permanent record of the messages delivered by them in the name of God to Israel and Judah. Prophets had had their share in preserving and interpreting the stories from the past which illustrated so forcefully God's purposes for his people. But now individual prophets, such as Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah, left behind them collections of teachings to be treasured by their disciples. The destruction of the Northern Kingdom in 721 B.C. must have lent great authority to these prophets who had seen so clearly the approaching disaster. It should be remembered, however, that as yet these different books were preserved separately and there was no unified body of all the sacred writings.

In 621 B.C. during King Josiah's reign in Judah, a law-book was discovered in the Temple, and an extensive reform of the nation's religion was begun on the basis of this book. The book, which was in large part the present book of Deuteronomy, had apparently been hidden in the Temple long before, having been written at a time when men understood God's law much better than they did in the time of Josiah. It was not simply a book of laws, but rather a passionate appeal to Israelites to return in faithfulness to the God whose covenant they had so recklessly broken. In this same spirit writers now went back over the existing histories of Israel and Judah and rewrote them in order to bring out more clearly the importance of faithfulness to God. The whole history became a series of illustrations of the fact that when the nation forgot its covenant with God it experienced ruin, but when it returned to him in obedience, its strength was marvelously renewed.

The destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. brought the Kingdom of Judah to an end, but it did not interrupt the growth of the Scriptures. In exile the Jews treasured their sacred writings as never before. The tragedy that they had lived through made many things clear to them that they had never rightly understood. Now, scattered through many lands, they retained a sense of being a nation with a special purpose from God by reading again and again the writings of priests and prophets.

#### "THE LAW" AND "THE PROPHETS"

The restoration of Jerusalem in 538 B.C. affected only a small number of the exiles. Strong communities of them remained in Babylon and elsewhere. But wherever Jews were found, there was interest in the writings that had come down from the past. The books of Ezekiel, Second Isaiah, Haggai, and Zechariah were now added to the number. In Babylon there was a dominant interest in law and in priestly matters, and again the early stories were worked over from this point of view. As a result, before 400 B.C., the Pentateuch, which consists of the first five books of the Old Testament, came into its present form and was recognized by Jews everywhere to possess the authority of sacred scripture. When Ezra returned from Babylon to Jerusalem about the middle of the fifth century B.C., the Book of the Law which he took with him and read publicly to the people of Jerusalem (Neh., ch. 8), was most likely the Pentateuch.

Other writings, such as the history of the kingdoms and the books of the prophets, continued to circulate both among the exiles and in Jerusalem. But it was not until about 200 B.C. that they were added to the Pentateuch as authoritative scripture. The historical writings, because they emphasized the careers of the early prophets—Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, and Elisha—were called the "Former Proph-

ets," while the collections of the various prophets' writings were called the "Latter Prophets." Both together were termed simply "The Prophets," in contrast to the Pentateuch, or "The Law."

#### "THE WRITINGS"

Through the years a third class of sacred writings had been gradually growing. The psalms, dating from every period of Israel's history, many of them of unknown authorship, were familiar to all the people through their use in worship. There were also proverbs, the distilled wisdom of a people, in constant use especially in the education of the young. There were later books, such as Job and Ecclesiastes, which touched on special problems of the inquiring mind. The Song of Songs had long been rooted in the affections of the people. Among these later writings also was Daniel. In the Hebrew Bible, it is not among the prophets (as it is in our English Bibles), but where it rightly belongs —among the writings in this third group. Not until A.D. 90 was it decided finally what writings were to be included in this third part of authoritative scripture which was named simply "The Writings."

It is well to know the story of how the Scriptures came to be, for it will save you from misunderstanding at many points in reading the Bible. It will also help you to see more clearly the great underlying redemptive purpose of God which binds all these writings together. You stand in wonder at the providence that over a period of more than a thousand years and through so many different men brought this work to its completion. It would have been simpler, perhaps we think, if God had chosen just one man and dictated the whole book to him. But that is not God's way of working. His word has to enter into men's lives so that it becomes clothed with human experience, and suffering has to be

endured by the servants of this word before it has its rightful power. No man can have God's truth for himself alone; he has to share it with his people; and often it is his children's children who enter most fully into its meaning. However closely the story of this word is knit with the human story of Israel and however much the passions and prejudices and sins of Israel find expression in the pages of the Bible, it remains always God's own truth, with power to redeem any man who comes to it with open ears and an open heart.

**PART TWO**

**the pentateuch**

*Called in the Hebrew Bible The Torah,  
or The Law*

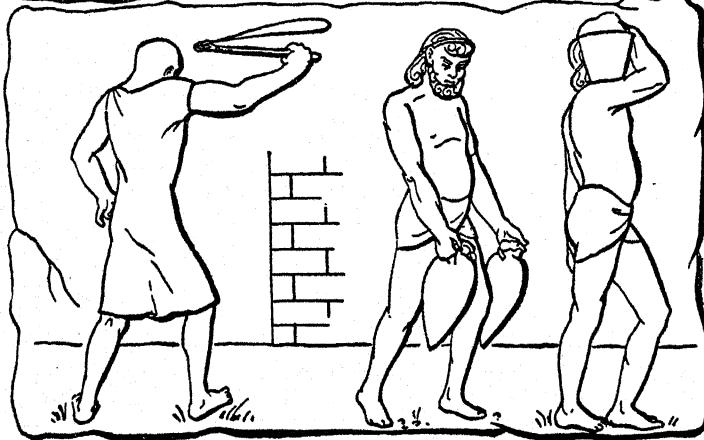
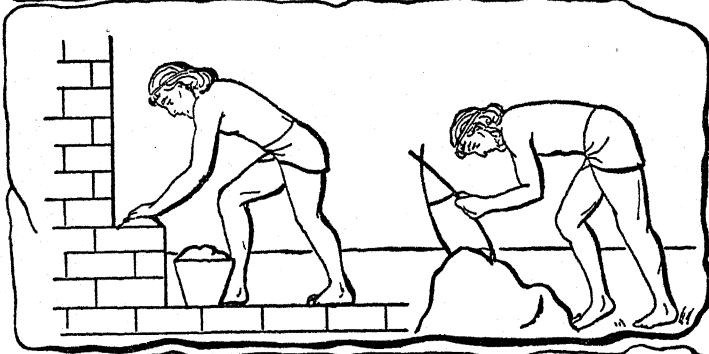
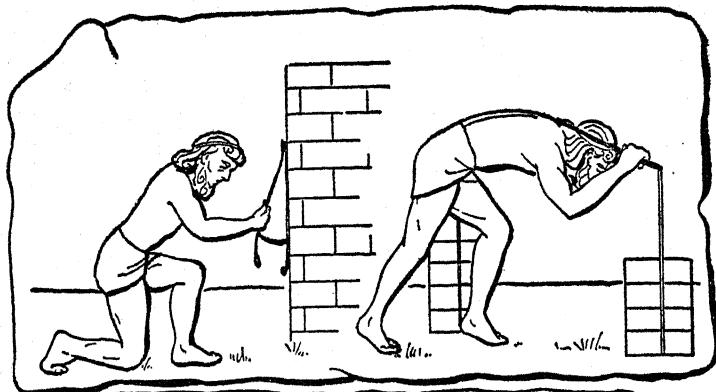
Genesis

Exodus

Leviticus

Numbers

Deuteronomy



## *genesis*

**W**HO AM I? Of course I know my own name and I could tell you quite a few facts about myself, but that would not answer the question. I have my own peculiar personality and my own special interests. But this question goes deeper. Sometimes when things are going fine, I hardly give it a thought. Then suddenly I seem hemmed in and suffocated and I am so dissatisfied that I want to smash everything loose. About that time the questions come poking back into my mind: What is this all about? Who am I? Where did I come from and where am I going?" So run your thoughts.

### THE STRANGER

One of the strange things about being human is that you can ask yourself puzzling and disturbing questions like that. You are a stranger to yourself.

When you start with those questions, there are others that usually follow. What is the meaning of all the events that make up your life? Is there any plan or purpose in them or do they just happen? Do you have to go on being the same person that you are, feeling and thinking and acting as you now do, or can you become a different kind of person? And this perplexing world that is all around you—which you certainly did not make but which has a great deal to do with making your life what it is—what purpose is there in it? Sometimes you think that there is no purpose, that it is

just like a big machine grinding on its way without rhyme or reason. It makes a great difference whether you must live in a world that has no purpose in it or in a world that has had a purpose in it from the beginning. Human history has produced whole libraries of books in which men have tried to answer these questions which refuse to be silenced: "Who am I? Why am I here? What is the meaning of my world?"

#### GENESIS BEGINS WITH GOD

It is of the very greatest importance that the Bible, in Genesis, begins with these great central questions of life upon which everything else depends, and that it answers them one after the other.

Genesis, however, does not answer the questions in the same order in which you asked them. You have begun with yourself. Genesis begins with God. It may seem to you that it should be a fairly simple matter to answer the question, "What is man?" and then to get on with the question of who God is. But it does not turn out that way. Who man is, it soon becomes plain, is almost as great a mystery as who God is. In the Bible these two questions belong together and cannot be taken apart. It is only as man comes to know God and to see his whole life under the light of God's presence that he can have a right understanding of himself and his destiny.

The Bible opens with a simple emphatic statement about God: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." It does not argue. It does not offer to discuss the matter and to consider different points of view. It does not attempt to prove the statement. In fact, nowhere in the Bible is the attempt ever made to *prove* that what it says about God is true. At once you may want to say: "But how did the writer of these words know that God created the heaven and

the earth? Why should I believe this rather than something else? I want proof that these things are so." The Bible answers with a deep silence, from which you may conclude that if you want proofs of the existence of God you had better look somewhere else.

This is a point on which you must be straight before you go farther. You need to understand *how* God speaks to you as you read the Bible. God speaks as person to person. Perhaps a very common experience will help here by way of illustration. When you meet a person, if you desire to know him better, you allow him to speak to you. And if he wishes to have you know him better, he tells you something of himself. This you cannot know unless he is willing to reveal himself to you. You do not attempt by logical reasoning to prove that he is, or that he is a person, or that he has spoken to you. You may test what he says by your own experience to determine for yourself whether or not it is true. But that he is, and that he has spoken to you, you do not attempt to prove.

Likewise, the writers of the Bible do not attempt to prove that God is, or that he has spoken. These are men who have heard God, who bear witness of him and of the things that he has shown them. They testify that they have met and heard him, and they pass on what they have heard. When you hear God speaking to you as you read their testimony in the Bible, it is for you to heed and to respond as a man should respond to God. To do this is to enter into fellowship with him.

#### WHAT IS GOD DOING?

Who is God? The first words of the Bible assert that from the very beginning God has been the Creator of all things. The world began in his mind and heart. He planned it and it came to be. This has sometimes been misunderstood and

men have thought that God merely started the world on its way and then stood aside to see what would happen—as a clockmaker does with a clock. You are warned against making that mistake by the way in which the Bible speaks of God, not merely as God who created but as God who creates. He is the world's Creator. He is the Creator of our world, and not just of a world that existed far distant from us at the beginning of time.

"God created the heaven and the earth." What difference does that make to you? For one thing it means that the world in which you live has a purpose and a plan. So many cruel and seemingly purposeless things happen that it often seems to men that they must despair of ever finding a purpose in the events of life. Can it be that all things are governed merely by chance and that the best anyone can do is to face bravely the prospect of living out his days in a world that is without purpose?

The answer of the faith that speaks in the Bible is that this world of ours belongs to God.

"The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof;  
The world, and they that dwell therein" (Ps. 24:1).

Because it is God's creation, it has meaning in every part of it, and it is the place where each person must find God's purpose for him. To call this world evil is to say that what God has made is evil. You can face tomorrow with confidence when you know that, however confused the world may seem to be, it still belongs to the God who made it and that nothing can keep him from bringing his purpose finally to fulfillment.

#### GENESIS INTRODUCES MAN

But what is your place in the world that God has made? Who are you? "God created man in his own image, in

the image of God created he him" (Gen. 1: 27). This, then, is what God intended man to be—a human creature, but in his nature pure as God is pure, true as God is true, just as God is just, merciful as God is merciful. It would be wrong to suggest that when Genesis was written men understood with complete clearness what it meant to be made in the likeness of God. Not until Christ came and showed in himself what it is for man to be truly in God's likeness, and taught that man's destiny is to be like God in His love and purity and truth, did the full meaning of these words in Genesis become plain.

When man is like God, the world is a Garden of Eden, a paradise. It is well to note that the Bible begins and ends with a paradise. The one is at the beginning of time and the other at the end of time. They both show the world as it would be if man were what God created him to be. When men are like God in their natures, then a world of peace and harmony and unending joy comes into being.

But this world is *not* paradise and the men you know are not like God. What has happened to make a world of disorder and conflict and cruelty? If God planned for man to be in his likeness and to live in a world of peace and order, how did the kind of man and the kind of world now in existence come to be? The answer of the Bible, as it was set down in Gen., ch. 3, is that man deliberately chose to be something other than God intended and that, as a consequence of his choice, he found himself in a world of selfish strife and murder, of confusion and misunderstanding, of suffering and disaster.

That is still the world in which you live. You can trace the characteristics of the modern world in chs. 4 to 11 of Genesis. Cain's quarrel with Abel, his killing of his brother, his refusal to accept responsibility—"Am I my brother's keeper?"—are paralleled in the life of men and of

nations in the twentieth century. The story of the Flood, whether it is thought of as a world-wide inundation or a more localized flood, is like a mirror in which you can see what God is doing in these times. The stubborn persistence of men in their own ways in spite of every warning and their refusal to consider God's will as practical in human life lead inevitably to the destruction of what man has been building so that he is forced to begin afresh. The building of the Tower of Babel, the top of which was to reach to heaven, calls to mind the proud claims that man has made for his civilization in modern days; and the resulting confusion of tongues in the old story is not unlike the strange inability of men in these times to understand each other. The world that is described in the first chapters of Genesis is thus a world that is only too familiar.

However, even in a world that rejects him, God remains Creator and Lord. The world cannot free itself from God. He does not let his purpose be defeated. Though men choose evil repeatedly, God judges their evil and punishes it in order to turn them from it and back to his way for them. Again and again these early chapters of Genesis make that clear.

Sometimes people say that the Law is in the Old Testament and the Gospel is in the New, or that God is a God of justice in the Old Testament and a God of love in the New. Already in Genesis you can see how unsatisfactory such a statement is. God brings the world into being that there may be men who will live with him in loving and obedient fellowship. The Creation is therefore an act of God's love. Moreover, sin is represented as a rejection of the conditions under which a man must live if he is to be in fellowship with God. It is not merely a breaking of laws, but rather the rupture of a personal relationship with God, as the psalmist knew so surely when he cried out:

"Against thee, thee only, have I sinned,  
And done this evil in thy sight" (Ps. 51:4).

Then when, in spite of human sin, God goes patiently forward with a plan that will span the ages and eventually win man back to him, what words except grace and love can be used to describe what God is doing?

#### A NEW STAGE IN GOD'S DEALING WITH MAN

If the book of Genesis stopped with ch. 11, a fitting title for it would be "The Plan That Failed." It would describe God's attempt to bring into being a world in which men in fellowship with him and with each other would realize a perfect order. And it would show how God was defeated by man's perversity so that nothing resulted except confusion and misery. But Genesis does not end with ch. 11. In ch. 12 we see taking shape God's plan for the redemption of a world that has rebelled against him. God chooses a man, Abraham, to be his man, that through Abraham others may become God's men, knowing him and serving him.

The call of Abraham begins a new stage in God's dealings with mankind. Out of the entire race God selects one family, which is to grow to become a people, a nation, through whom God can win the world to himself. The rest of Genesis tells the story of Abraham, his son Isaac, his grandson Jacob, and Jacob's son Joseph.

These patriarchs came originally from Ur in Babylonia and settled for a time in Haran, a chief city of Padan-aram in northern Mesopotamia. They were seminomads, who rode on asses, not camels; kept cattle; and pastured sheep and goats. They lived on the edge of the desert, or in oases where water could be had for their livestock. Later they traveled with their flocks up and down through the hill country of Palestine.

As their life was simple, so also was their faith. The

patriarchs worshiped El Shaddai ("The God, the Mountain One"). He was regarded as the God of their family, bound to them by the strongest ties of kinship. This bond, involving faithfulness on the part of God, devotion and service on the part of the patriarch and his family, was sealed by a solemn covenant between them. Each patriarch in turn acknowledged God for himself. Thus the Lord is known not only as the "God of Abraham," but also as the "Kinsman of Isaac," and the "Champion of Jacob."

#### THE STORY OF ABRAHAM

Abraham was a man of vision and achievement, capable, daring, successful. He was mighty in the councils of war, and an able harvester of the fruits of peace. He was a pioneer in a strange land, the founder of a great house. But besides these things he towered as a hero of faith, and he was called "the friend of God."

When God called him, he responded in faith, and went forth from the home of his fathers. He gathered his possessions and, together with Sarah his wife and Lot his nephew, went down to the Land of Canaan. There he built an altar and worshiped before God. God appeared to him and made him this promise:

"I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great: I will bless those that bless you, and curse those that curse you. And I will give this land to your descendants." \*

Abraham prospered in the new land; he enlarged his flocks and herds, and his wealth in silver and gold increased.

God renewed his solemn covenant again and again with

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Wherever an asterisk (\*) appears, it indicates some departure from the King James Version, but not from the meaning of the original text.

Abraham: the promise of a vast and noble posterity, and the promise of the Land of Canaan as their inheritance. To seal the covenant, Abraham offered sacrifices to God, while God on his part assured Abraham of his protection and care. He added also that an heir would shortly be born to Abraham and Sarah, although they were advanced in years and had had no children.

After a time God's promise to Sarah was fulfilled. A son was born to the elderly couple, and they named him Isaac. The boy was the living sign of the covenant between God and Abraham, the pledge of its fulfillment. Through this lad and his descendants the promises were to be made good. Not many years later, however, God put Abraham to a severe test over this boy. "Take your son," he said, "your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and there offer him as a burnt offering upon one of the hills." \*

Human sacrifice, though practiced only under special circumstances, was not uncommon in the Land of Canaan. The sacrifice of the first-born was regarded as an act of extraordinary piety and devotion to the gods. This practice did not completely die out in Palestine for many centuries, being revived especially in times of distress, when extreme measures were taken to appease the wrath of God, and to insure favorable action on his part.

Abraham did not falter when God demanded the life of his son. He might wonder at the mystery of God's ways, but he could not doubt his Protector and Friend. With heaviness of heart, Abraham set out upon the way. Then, leaving his servants to care for the provisions, he went alone with Isaac to the sanctuary. He carried the knife and an instrument for making fire, while Isaac carried the wood.

Abraham bound his son and laid him upon the pyre.

But as he grasped the knife to slay the boy, he heard words sounding in his ears, which brought him to a halt:

"Abraham, Abraham! Do not lay hands on the boy, for I know now that you revere God and that you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." \*

Abraham looked up, and saw a ram caught by the horns in a thicket. This he took and slew and offered up as a burnt offering instead of Isaac. Then, rejoicing, he returned home—with his son.

Abraham learned thus that God does not require human sacrifice; more than this, that he never permits it—a bitter lesson which the ancient world understood only after many thousands of victims had been sacrificed.

Abraham learned also the cost of the love and friendship of God: total allegiance, complete self-denial. Whatever God requires, whether small or great, that is his due. All that a man is, all that he has, all that he is able to do—he owes all to God. And he must be ready to give up all, because God does not demand less. To leave father and mother, brother and sister; to surrender possessions and authority; to pour out time and effort; to offer the whole heart and soul upon the altar of sacrifice—that is the faith of a hero; that is the price of God's love.

#### THE STORY OF JACOB

Isaac chose for himself the God of his father, and the covenant was renewed between them. The promise of an heir was fulfilled in twin sons, Esau and Jacob. When they grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob became a man of peaceful pursuits, making his home in tents.

In spite of his selfish ambition, his unpromising record of deception and theft, Jacob was chosen to inherit the

promises made to his fathers. He had to go through bitter experiences as a consequence of his weaknesses but this was God's disciplining of him to prepare him for his destiny. He responded vigorously to the challenge of God, and willingly undertook the responsibilities of his position as clan chieftain, and patriarch of a numerous people.

## THE STORY OF JOSEPH

Joseph was the favorite of his father Jacob, and for that reason he was heartily disliked by his brothers. He was also a dreamer, and that brought him trouble, especially when he dreamed of becoming a ruler over them. They hated him for his dreams and for his words. Then one day they plotted against him and waylaid him in the fields. At first they planned to kill him, but wiser counsel prevailed, and they sold him to a group of traders going down to Egypt. These in turn sold him to an officer of the Pharaoh, named Potiphar.

Throughout his life in Egypt, Joseph remained faithful to his God. He held fast to his integrity under all circumstances; first as the trusted steward of his master's house; then when Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him and, finding it impossible, falsely accused him before her husband. Cast into prison, Joseph remained the same stalwart, conscientious man that he had been before, and later when he was elevated to authority, as administrator of the whole land of Egypt, his success and power did not undermine his character.

Joseph, as a high official in Egypt, was in a position to pay back his brothers in full, to avenge himself for the cruel treatment he had received at their hands. But when they came to Egypt seeking food in time of famine, he forgave them. Out of pity and love, and the warm compassion of his spirit, he blessed those who had cursed him, prayed for

those who had despitefully used him, and returned good for evil.

He said to them:

"I am Joseph, your brother. Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves that you sold me into slavery. For although you intended evil against me, God meant it for good, to save you and many others from death." \*

When Joseph grew old, he reminded his brothers that, however long they and their children remained in Egypt, they were nevertheless to return one day to the Land of Canaan according to the word of God:

"I am about to die," he said. "But God will take you up out of this land to the land which he promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." \*

#### A PROBLEM OF UNDERSTANDING

When all this has been said about the meaning of Genesis, there are likely to be many who will still feel that their problem of understanding has not yet been touched. Here is a paragraph from a letter written by a student:

"I have one problem that has been bothering me a lot lately. I always thought of the world as being made in six days, just as Genesis says. But in our history class we have been learning that it took millions of years for the universe to come into its present form. In my Bible the date of the Creation is marked as 4004 B.C., but the teacher says that skeletons of men have been dug up that are nearly 100,000 years old. I don't see how both can be true, yet I don't like to think that anything in the Bible isn't true."

That is a real problem, although it looks more serious at first than it really is. It looks as if the truth of the whole Christian religion were in danger. Since science has pro

for the things it says, the case against the Bible seems very strong. This is an unhappy position for anyone to be in—to feel that in order to defend the Bible he will have to close his eyes to the facts about the history of the world that scientific research has brought to light.

But that is a position in which no Christian should ever be placed. A person who really believes in the God who speaks to us in the Bible is never afraid of truth because he knows that God and truth always belong together. Even though it makes difficult problems for him, the Christian will acknowledge the truth wherever it appears. Because God is truth he can never be served by untruth.

To the question about the date of creation the answer is simple. Back in the seventeenth century an Irish archbishop named Ussher, who was a learned man for his day, set out to fix dates for every event in the Bible. Many other people have tried to do the same thing and have arrived at many different answers. But, in 1701, Bibles were printed with Ussher's dates in the margins, and even today some Bibles still are published with these dates in notes or margins. As a matter of fact, there is nothing in Genesis itself that suggests a date for creation. You have no reason to consider the year 4004 B.C. as anything other than Archbishop Ussher's personal opinion in the matter.

#### GENESIS AND SCIENCE

So far as history is concerned, there need be no conflict between Genesis and the findings of the scientists. Anyone who expects to find in Genesis a detailed history of the world in the making will be disappointed. Instead, it offers what the historians do not, and cannot, offer: a knowledge of God and of the meaning of man's life in the world. Science has disclosed thousands of things about the world and its history that are important but that have no place in the

Bible, and it ought not to trouble you that they are not to be found there. But science fails to tell the most important things about the world: the purpose for which it came into being; whether or not there is an unseen power or person controlling it, and, if so, what he is like; the rightful place of man in the world; and how man can live at peace with God, with himself, and with his fellow man.

There is a warning in Genesis itself against reading the early chapters as a step-by-step history of the world's beginnings. Surely it was under the guidance of God's Spirit that two separate stories of the Creation were preserved, the one in Gen. 1: 1 to 2: 3; the other in Gen. 2: 4-25. In these two the backgrounds, the orders of events, and various details are different. Could it be more clearly told by the Bible itself that these matters are of small importance in comparison with what is being said concerning God and man and the whole creation?

#### THE GEOGRAPHY AND ASTRONOMY OF GENESIS

In regard to geography and astronomy it should surprise no one that Biblical writers shared the ideas that were prevalent at the time in which they wrote. Astronomers had not yet discovered how vast the universe is, nor had men traveled far enough to learn that the world is round. How, then, did a man of that time conceive of his world?

First, he was sure that there must be something to hold back the waters in the sky, and he called this the firmament. It was the half-round vault of the heavens that to the naked eye seems to come down and rest on the earth on every side. It appeared to be holding back a flood of waters beyond the sky.

The earth seemed to him to be like a flat, floating island. If a man traveled far in any direction, he came eventually to great waters. Therefore the earth was surrounded with

water. But also if a man dug deeply enough in the earth, he came to water again. Therefore there were waters below the earth as well as on every side. This structure of things is perfectly mirrored in the words of the psalm concerning the earth:

"For he hath founded it upon the seas,  
And established it upon the floods" (Ps. 24:2).

You often may be inclined to forget that only in comparatively recent years have men ceased to think of the world as flat. For centuries there was no way for them to learn that it was round or to discover the vast spaces of the universe with stars far larger than our world.

It does not detract, however, from the witness of the Creation story to the truth concerning God and man that its geography and astronomy are the geography and astronomy of the time of the writer. It is not instruction in geography or in astronomy that you should be seeking from the Bible, but knowledge of God and of yourself, and of how you may find your true life in God.

#### HOW GENESIS WAS WRITTEN

You already have noted that there are two stories of the Creation. It will be no surprise, therefore, to learn that in the book of Genesis stories have been built together from more than one source. During the centuries when there were two kingdoms, Israel and Judah, stories from the past were handed down from generation to generation in both kingdoms. Many of them were written down. Just as happened later with the Gospel stories, there came to be differences in the separate accounts of the same incidents. Some things were remembered in one place that were forgotten in others. But when the Northern Kingdom was destroyed and only Judah remained, men began to gather

together the records of the past from both kingdoms and the separate accounts were put together to form one story. Then later, when Judah was destroyed and the long exile began, the whole story was reworked in the light of the knowledge men now had of God and of his purpose for them.

This process, in fact, took place not only with Genesis but with all the books that tell the story of Israel's past. The finished book was thus the result of the guidance that God gave his people in understanding their history over a long period of time. Into it went the interpretations of the prophets, the devotion of the priests, and the knowledge that could come to a people only through centuries of wrestling with the meaning of God's will for them. The ordinary reader of today receives the benefit of Israel's experience without being conscious of all the strands that have been woven together. He may notice the different accounts of the Creation, or some conflicting details in the story of the Flood. But what matters to him is the message of the completed book.

**HOW TO READ GENESIS.** Genesis can be read straight through like any other book, if you will. You may omit reading such chapters as ch. 5 and ch. 36, which are mostly lists of names. If you prefer to sample the book here and there, or if you want to know where to find certain notable parts of it, refer to the following:

Two stories of creation: (a) chs. 1: 1 to 2: 3; (b) ch. 2: 4-25.

How sin began: ch. 3.

Cain and Abel: ch. 4: 1-15.

The Flood: chs. 6: 9 to 9: 28.

The Tower of Babel: ch. 11: 1-9.

Stories of Abraham: chs. 12 to 25; of Jacob: chs. 25: 27 to 35; of Joseph: chs. 37 to 50.

## exodus

BETWEEN the closing events of the book of Genesis and the opening of the book of Exodus there was an interval of several hundred years. The passing of these centuries allowed for great changes to take place. In Genesis the Israelites are little more than a family: the father, Jacob, who was also called Israel; his twelve sons; their children; and servants. They are living in comfort in Egypt and command a place of respect because of the high office of Joseph in the government of the land. They have little inclination to return to Palestine and the bare shepherd life to which they were accustomed there, even though such a return would be easy since at that time Egypt controlled Palestine and Syria.

### A SLAVE PEOPLE

The book of Exodus opens upon a very different scene some hundreds of years later. The family has multiplied until there are thousands of Israelites in Egypt, many of them with no remembrance whatsoever that their forefathers came from another land. It may be taken for granted that many would intermarry with the Egyptians and become like the Egyptians in every way. And yet some of the Israelites remembered stories that came down to them from the past—stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—which gave them a sense of being a people apart, with a special destiny to fulfill. With the passing of the centuries the Israelites

had lost their place of power and wealth in Egyptian life and had reached the very bottom of the social scale. All their rights had been taken away and they were employed as slaves on public building projects.

It is clear that the Israelites were regarded by the government as a minority group valuable for labor and yet large enough to be dangerous if Egypt were attacked by a rival power. The Egyptians were not willing to expel them from the land because that would mean the loss of valuable cheap labor and would disrupt the order of things. The upper classes in Egypt enjoyed a life of leisure because they were able to control the labor of such people as the Israelites. But if war should come, these slaves might take the opportunity to rebel and so become a great menace. So important was this to Egypt that a ruthless policy was followed, providing for the murder of newborn Israelite boys in order to prevent any undue increase in their numbers. Also the Israelites were given no more to eat than was necessary to keep them at their heavy work. Undoubtedly the Egyptians excused themselves for such policies by pointing out that they were a highly educated and civilized people who really counted for something in the world, while the Israelites were ignorant and brutish, unfit for anything but the crude life that was their lot. Had nothing entered in to change the situation, the Israelites might have disappeared from history more than three thousand years ago and probably nothing would be known of them today.

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#### GOD KEEPING WATCH

Had nothing entered in! The story of how in a seemingly hopeless situation events took a new turn and the Israelites, instead of being exterminated, went on to a new and decisive stage in their history is an illustration for all time of God's action in the life of men and nations. What happened in

Egypt and in the exodus from Egypt cannot be understood in purely human terms.

The reader of Exodus must be prepared at this point for an idea, a conviction, that is not very familiar in the modern world but is central to the whole Bible. That idea, that conviction, is that God acts in the midst of human history. There are more than merely human forces at work in the shaping of events; things can happen in most surprising ways, completely different from what you would expect in the normal working of things, because the God whom you worship is Lord of history, with power to direct the course of events in human life.

That is not the way in which most people think of God in the present-day world. To them God is a spiritual Being about whom they have certain thoughts and feelings, of whom they hear a certain amount of talk in church but rarely elsewhere. It would surprise them greatly to find him actually doing anything in their immediate world. God is always at a safe distance from them. They can discuss their problems about God and they expect him to mean something in the inner world of men's thoughts and feelings. But they do not expect him *to act* in their world as a living person, with purposes and thoughts and plans of his own. Then, perhaps, in the contradictory way that is so characteristic of human beings, they complain that God never does anything—that, so far as they can see, he makes no difference whatever in what happens in the world. It may be that one of the most serious forms of unbelief among people is that, while they believe in the existence of God and in his goodness, truth, and love, they banish from their minds all expectation of his doing anything in the events that are shaping the present and future history of the world. Because they are blind to what he is doing in history, he is unable to use them in the working out of his purposes.

## THE CALL OF MOSES

The Israelite storytellers of later days delighted to trace the series of incidents that led step by step to the deliverance of their people from slavery in Egypt and the beginning of their history as a nation called especially to the service of God. They saw a divine providence at work, saving the life of the infant Moses when so many other Israelite children were being destroyed. This providence gained for Moses the educational advantages of Egyptian nobles, and then involved him in difficulties making it impossible for him to continue indefinitely the leisured life of the palace. The various elements in the experience of Moses fit together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle to make him the kind of leader that his people needed. His education in the royal schools gave him a training that was not open to other Israelites. Nevertheless, he kept in touch with the traditions of his own people so that he did not become wholly swallowed up by Egyptian life. And the years that he spent as a shepherd in Midian, which might have seemed wasted time for so great a future leader, were actually a period when all his powers were being brought to their necessary maturity.

Moses did not see the meaning of the things that were happening to him at the time when they happened. When he went out one day and, seeing an Israelite being beaten by an Egyptian guard, struck down the Egyptian and killed him, he did not realize that in this action he was once and for all casting in his lot with his own oppressed people. He acted on the impulse of the moment, but what happened provided a turning point in his life. Similarly, when the deed became known and Moses had to escape from Egypt, it must have seemed to him like the tragic early ending of a promising career. He had no way of knowing that he was entering upon

the final stage of preparation for his lifework. It was not until later that it was revealed to Moses how in all these events the hand of God was directing him toward his true destiny.

#### THE PREPARATION OF A LEADER

When Moses left Egypt, he crossed into the Peninsula of Sinai and found safety in the rough country of Midian. He made his home with Jethro, a priest of Midian, and married his daughter Zipporah. The religion of the wandering shepherds for whom Jethro was priest must have been different from the religions with which Moses was already familiar both among the Israelites and among the Egyptians. It is useless to speculate concerning what religious ideas Moses himself might have had at this time. Certainly you ought not to think of him as having already arrived at the stage of understanding and belief reached by the great prophets of a later day. He probably found much in common with the priest Jethro and was content to live and worship with him, using forms that to a Christian of today would seem very strange. The day was yet to come when Moses would take the step that would carry him and his whole people in a new direction.

The experience in which Moses came to a special knowledge of God and was called to a special task has been interpreted in various ways. While he was watching his flock of sheep on the mountainside, suddenly it seemed to him that a bush was blazing with fire and yet was not being burned up. As he drew near to it he heard a voice warning him that he was in the very presence of God. Whatever it was that his eyes saw in their physical vision, the total experience of which the bush was a part was a vision of God—like Isaiah's vision of God (Isa., ch. 6), making Isaiah a prophet to his

day, or Paul's vision of Christ (Acts, ch. 9), making Paul a missionary of the Gospel. In the flaming bush Moses knew suddenly what God was to his people. As he tended his flocks Moses had been brooding over the fate of his people in Egypt, unable to see how anything could prevent their complete destruction; then came the moment when he realized that he had left out of consideration what was more important than all else, the presence and power of God. Thereupon the entire situation was changed, and, instead of despairing, Moses was confident that God's purpose for his people must finally triumph over all obstacles.

Moses' vision of God was related to the past, present, and future of the Israelites. He heard God saying to him, "I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Ex. 3: 6). Thus Moses saw his own task as that of carrying forward a purpose, the same purpose that had led Abraham out of his ancestral home in Mesopotamia long before. Remembering the past helped him to see more clearly what God's will for him was. In the present he was conscious of the overwhelming compassion of God for his people in their distress. The God who spoke to Moses was a God who could not look unmoved upon injustice and oppression. This was to become central in Israel's understanding of God through the centuries. They were convinced that God cares so intensely about those who are downtrodden and oppressed that, if necessary, he will overthrow a whole nation in order to establish a just order. At the heart of the universe and in control of the outcome of events is a Power who hates injustice and tyranny and wrong. As for the future, Moses' vision of God became the decisive event in shaping a future for the Israelites. Without Moses' fresh vision of God they most probably would have remained in Egypt, and ultimately have disappeared from history.

## THE DELIVERANCE OF A PEOPLE

Chapters 5 to 15 of Exodus tell the story of the events that finally resulted in the Israelite slaves' gaining their freedom. Moses' first attempts to set them free brought only an increase in the severity of the Egyptians. The government was not willing to lose its cheap slave labor. Then came a series of disasters for the Egyptians, known to us as the plagues of Egypt. Moses told Pharaoh that these were signs of God's anger at him for oppressing the Israelites. Pharaoh at first was not inclined to take seriously any threats concerning the power of the God of the Israelites to injure his land. However, as the situation became more and more serious, and finally when a plague became epidemic among Egyptian first-born children, he changed his mind and let them go.

Discoveries by archaeologists in recent years make it possible to trace to some extent the historical background of the Exodus. In Ex. 1: 11 you can read how the Israelites worked on government projects in Pithom and Rameses. These places in the northern Delta of Egypt have been excavated and it is plain that no extensive buildings were undertaken there until after 1320 B.C. About that time the capital of Egypt was moved from Thebes in Upper Egypt to the Delta. The Israelites living in Goshen on the northeast border of Egypt were pressed into service in the building of great storehouses, which the Pharaoh intended to use as a base of operations for his armies as they pushed northward through Palestine and Syria. Evidence from Palestine seems to indicate that the Israelites entered Palestine between 1250 and 1225 B.C. Allowing for a full generation that they lived in the desert, this would mean that they left Egypt early in the reign of Ramesses II about 1290-1280 B.C.

The Israelites through all their history looked back upon their deliverance from Egypt as proof of God's care for them

and of his power to make a way for them where no way seemed possible. It was often the theme of their songs, encouraging their faith, when in later days they faced great difficulties. They always thought of their God as the God who had led them out of Egypt. Each year in the Passover festival the whole nation looked back to the days of its beginnings and took fresh courage from the thought of what God did for it then. It should be remembered also that the Passover and the great deliverance that it commemorated formed the background of the Last Supper, when Jesus turned the minds of the disciples to a new and greater act of deliverance that God was about to perform. Even as he redeemed Israelite slaves out of Egypt into a new life as his people, so now he would act to redeem mankind out of the slavery of sin into the new life of the Kingdom.

#### THE MAKING OF A NATION

It seems little less than a miracle that these Israelite slaves from Egypt should in one generation have been molded into a nation persuaded of its calling to a unique destiny among men, and that they should have acknowledged standards of life that set them above any ancient people. The making of a nation, even in more favorable circumstances, is no easy task for statesmen. Here, with everything against the possibility of success, you can see a nation taking shape before your eyes.

The foundation of the nation's life was the conviction that in delivering it from Egypt God was calling it to fulfill a unique task. Just as he had chosen Abraham, so now the Israelites were convinced that he was choosing them and marking them out as his people. He was making a covenant with them, in which he was promising that if they would be faithful to him and obey his will, he would be their God and

would prosper them as a people in years to come.

This unique relationship of Israel to God as his chosen people often has been misunderstood. It does not mean that God thereby favored Israel to the exclusion of other nations or gave to this people privileges and honors that the others could not enjoy. For God is no respecter of men or nations but is equally Father of all. It must be admitted that often in the course of their history many Israelites wrongly interpreted their calling by thinking of it as a matter of special privilege. Nevertheless, it was the constant endeavor of the prophets to make plain the truth that their nation was set apart, not for special privilege, but for special responsibility. God chose them that finally they might be the means of bringing all men to know him. The Israelites had to learn with the years that this high calling did not make life easier for them than for other nations, but harder. Although such matters were not clear to them in their earliest days, one thing they had no cause to doubt: The God in whose name Moses spoke to them was worthy of their entire confidence and loyalty.

After the Hebrews were released from Egypt, they had numerous proofs of God's care of them. When they seemed caught once more in a hopeless situation, with waters blocking the way before them and Pharaoh's army closing in behind, God's word to Moses was, "Speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward" (Ex. 14: 15). Exactly what happened is not entirely clear, but the Israelites reached safety beyond the waters while the Egyptians suffered severe losses and were stopped. Later, when the Israelites were starving, they found each morning on the ground tiny bits of a sweet food which they called manna. These and other extraordinary incidents were clear evidence to them of the constant care of God.

## THE COVENANT AND THE LAW

At Mount Sinai a new stage in the life of the Israelites began. When they left Egypt, they were hardly more than a mob of fugitive slaves. They were not fit, as yet, for the responsibility of being God's people. Three things were necessary. One was a unifying loyalty; another, a pattern for everyday living; and the third, a code for the direction of their worship. You may read in Ex., ch. 19, how God sent Moses down from Mount Sinai to tell the people about the covenant under which they would accept the Lord as their God and obey his will and he would guard and guide them as his chosen people. It was this allegiance to God under the covenant that was to be for them a unifying loyalty. The book of Exodus after ch. 19 helps to make clear what God required of the people in obedience to the covenant. There are directions not only for everyday living but also for all kinds of religious practices. Chapter 20 contains the Ten Commandments, while in chs. 20: 22 to 23: 33 is found one of the earliest of the Israelite law codes. The various law codes in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy represent many centuries of growth and development. Some parts come from the time of Moses and form a central nucleus of which the later laws are an elaboration. The foundations of Israelite law were laid by Moses, and as new codes were developed to fit the needs of each new age they were put forward under the name and with the authority of the original giver of the law.

Two characteristics of the law stand out above all others. First, Israel must worship God alone and keep free from all worship of idols. In a world that was teeming with gods and idols, this alone would be enough to mark Israel out as a nation different from all others. The second characteristic was the insistence that obedience to God demanded a life of

honesty, justice, purity, and mercy. The gods of the ancient world, the gods of the Israelites' neighbors, made few such demands upon their worshipers. Israel's God refused anything less than a thoroughgoing, daily obedience.

The Tabernacle is described in great detail in Exodus. In its present form the account undoubtedly includes features that do not belong to the Tabernacle of the desert wanderings, since a very simple tent would have been quite sufficient then as a place of worship. They reflect rather a later and more elaborate stage in the development of the Tabernacle, after the Israelites were settled in Palestine.

**HOW TO READ EXODUS.** The story section of Exodus takes up only the first nineteen chapters. This can be read straight through. If there seem to be repetitions here and there, it is an indication that the editors were using more than one source for the same story. The laws in chs. 21 to 23 are extremely interesting, as showing how a primitive agricultural people's lives were regulated, and also showing that principles of fairness and justice are the same everywhere. The descriptions of the Tabernacle can hardly be understood without the help of a good Bible dictionary. Here are some of the more important passages:

Israelites as slaves in Egypt: ch. 1.

The baby in the bulrushes: ch. 2: 1-10.

God's voice in the burning bush: chs. 3: 1 to 4: 17.

The plagues of Egypt: chs. 7 to 12.

The Passover: ch. 12.

Crossing the Red Sea: ch. 14. (Ch. 15 is a poetic account of the same event.)

The manna: ch. 16: 30-36.

The Ten Commandments: ch. 20: 1-17.

The golden calf: ch. 32.

Some of Moses' prayers: chs. 32: 30-35; 33: 12-23.

## Leviticus : numbers

**W**HEN you begin to read Leviticus, you may feel at once that you have wandered into a strange land. With good reason you may be puzzled to know what the words of this book have to do with you. Here are instructions in such matters as how to kill a young bull and offer it as a sacrifice for sin. Here are carefully detailed rules about other sacrifices. Here is a description of how a priest must dress when he is performing his duties. Here are laws stating what creatures are clean and may be eaten and what ones, being unclean, are not to be eaten. Well may the Christian worshiper feel himself in a strange world; for in the Christian Church animal sacrifices have been abolished, and taboos prohibiting the eating of pork and other foods are no longer recognized as having any binding force.

### CHARACTER LIKE UNTO GOD

When you recognize, however, that the rules and laws of this book apply to an era that was quite different from our Christian Era, and when you read them in the light of the time to which they applied, they take on more meaning. They are regulations for the worship of an ancient people that knew itself called of God to live in a covenant relationship with him. The keynote of the book is, "Ye shall be holy: for I the Lord your God am holy." God's holiness is the purity of his nature and the presence in him of those qualities that are the opposite of all that is unclean and evil.

When a man becomes aware of the holiness of God, he feels intensely the elements of baseness, untruth, injustice, and wrong that defile his own life and separate him from God. In order to live in fellowship with God his life has to be purified so that he begins to share the holiness of God. Thus one of the chief aims of worship in Israel was purification, and behind much of the ritual of sacred offerings was the passionate desire of the worshipers to become holy and so to be received into fellowship with God.

Holiness and unholiness were attached to persons and things according as they seemed to draw the worshiper closer to God or to thrust him away. The priests of the sanctuary, the sacrifices, the vessels used for sacrifices, the festivals, and the laws for a life in obedience to God, all were called holy, while priests of pagan gods or foods connected with pagan worship or actions involving disobedience to God were called unholy. There was always the danger that things in themselves and apart from their relation to God would be considered holy or unholy and thus cause the real meaning of holiness to be lost. To be holy was to have one's life drawn into that circle where God was known and reverenced, and to be separated from that which was not approved by God.

#### BEING HOLY THEN AND NOW

It should be recognized that many of the laws of Leviticus were of great importance at that time. The regulations concerning food did much to safeguard the health of the people. The establishment and preservation of carefully ordered religious institutions was a necessity in the life of Israel. And the sacrifices, which are so strange to us, represent a reaching out toward that pardon and atonement for sin which was to be perfected only in Jesus Christ.

You must face honestly, however, the question of what is

binding on you, and what is not binding, in the book of Leviticus. Here is an excellent place for you to see clearly the relationship of the New Testament to some parts of the Old. In Lev. 24: 19, 20, it is written,

"If a man cause a blemish in his neighbor; as he hath done, so shall it be done to him; breach for breach, eye for eye, tooth for tooth."

At this point you have the authority of Jesus Christ himself for saying that this law is no longer binding on you. In Matt. 5: 38, 39, Jesus replaces this law with a higher one:

"Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: but I say unto you, That ye resist not evil."

But when you turn to Lev. 19: 18: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," the words fairly leap at you from the page, and you know that Christ has bound them upon the hearts of his people for all time.

That a Christian should have to distinguish between what is to be obeyed and what is not to be obeyed in the laws of Leviticus may seem to pose quite a problem. Actually it is not very difficult to see what laws apply only to ancient Hebrew life and what ones have in them a commandment of God for the Christian of today. You may eat pork untroubled by Lev. 11: 7, because the reason for the ancient prohibition of it no longer applies. You may pass over all the laws of sacrifice, for Christ is your sacrifice for sin, offered once and for all, so that you have only to receive the benefits of it with penitence and thanksgiving. However, when in Lev., ch. 19, you read laws that breathe a concern for the poor and the stranger and the helpless in the land and hear in it the ever-repeated call to purity of life, you should acknowledge that it is as though these commands were being laid upon you by Jesus Christ himself.

HOW TO READ LEVITICUS. There are two stories in Leviticus, both short:

The sin of the strange fire: ch. 10: 1-7.

The man who forgot and cursed: ch. 24: 10-23.

Leviticus probably was never intended as a reading book, but as a work of reference. Reading it straight through gives only a confused impression, like reading a modern municipal code at one sitting. Some noteworthy passages are suggested below:

Description of some typical sacrifices: chs. 1: 10-17; 3: 6-11; 4: 1-12.

Laws for "clean" and "unclean" foods: ch. 11.

Chapter 12 gives the law that Jesus' parents observed (Luke, ch. 2) when they took Jesus up to the Temple, forty days after his birth. This law shows also how we know that Jesus' parents must have been quite poor.

How the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) was celebrated: ch. 16.

Chapters 17 to 26 include the "Holiness Code," a special collection of laws.

Laws to help the poor: chs. 19: 9, 10; 19: 13; 25: 39, 40.

The most quoted law in Leviticus: ch. 19: 18.

An early business law: ch. 19: 35, 36.

"Eye for eye, tooth for tooth": ch. 24: 19, 20.

A verse inscribed on our Liberty Bell: ch. 25: 10.

#### THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

Long lists of names do not make interesting or helpful reading except for the painstaking scholar who may find in them clues to the solution of some historical problem. The first ten chapters of the book of Numbers contain in great detail the arrangement of the tribes and the numbering of them, a description of gifts offered by various princes to the sanctuary, and laws on various matters most of which

are not applicable in the modern world. In the midst of these chapters, however, is the beautiful benediction,

"The Lord bless thee, and keep thee:  
The Lord make his face shine upon thee,  
and be gracious unto thee:  
The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee,  
and give thee peace" (ch. 6:24-26).

#### TRAINING OF PEOPLE TAKES TIME

With ch. 10: 11, the story of Israel's wanderings continues from where it stopped at the end of the book of Exodus. A little over a year had passed since the Israelites came out of Egypt. At Sinai they had received both the civil and the religious ordering of their life. The Tabernacle had been constructed for their worship. Now they were ready to move northward into Palestine. The journey began, but it was to be more than thirty-eight years before it was completed.

The length of time that the Israelites required to go from Sinai into Palestine often has created misunderstanding. From Mount Sinai to the southernmost town in Palestine, Beer-sheba, is two hundred miles. It could be reached on foot in ten days without traveling at any great speed. Palestine was never far away at any time during the years of Israel's desert wanderings. Yet a whole generation had to pass before the people were ready to enter their future homeland. Practically all who came out from Egypt lived and died in the desert. The nation that finally entered Palestine was a people that had grown up in the desert under Moses' leadership and had been trained in new ways by him. These years of desert life were thus of the greatest importance. Had Israel gone immediately into Palestine, it would have lost its new-found unity and it would have been exposed to the temptations of Canaanite life and religion before it had strength to resist such forces.

A theme constantly repeated in Numbers is the rebellion of the people against the hardships of their life and against the leadership of Moses. As they looked back to Egypt they forgot all the sufferings and indignities that they had endured there and remembered only the pleasant things. At one time they proposed to elect a captain who would lead them back to Egypt (ch. 14: 4). Stories are told of Aaron and Miriam, the brother and sister of Moses, who rebelled against his rule and claimed equal place with him (ch. 12), and also of certain Levites who challenged his right to rule alone and contended for a more democratic order. You can well understand how the firm rule of Moses, who insisted upon a discipline to which this people had never been accustomed before, would rouse opposition. It is a tribute to Moses' great powers that he retained the loyalty of the people unbroken through all these difficult years until he had led them within sight of their final destination.

After the tribes left Sinai an attempt was made to enter Palestine from the south. Spies were sent ahead, but soon returned with discouraging news. They testified to the rich fruitfulness of the land and were reported to have brought back a bunch of grapes so large that it required two of them to carry it. Nevertheless, they said it would be dangerous to try to enter, for great giants lived in the land. The peril, however, was magnified out of all proportion, with the result that people were frightened and turned a deaf ear to Moses' pleading that they go ahead. Because of their cowardice and unwillingness to obey, God compelled them to remain in the desert for the rest of their lives.

#### ONE LINK IN A LONG, LONG CHAIN

The book of Numbers tells little concerning the long years in the desert. It narrates the stages of the journey and the battles that had to be fought as the Israelites pushed

northward on the east side of the Dead Sea in order to enter Palestine from the east. It tells of Moses' completion of his task and the appointment of Joshua in his place. When it closes, some tribes are already settled in Gilead, east of the Jordan, while the others are ready and waiting to cross into their new home.

This book came into its present form centuries after the events that it describes. Different documents were blended together just as they were in Genesis, Exodus, and Leviticus, and at some points there are reflections of the conditions of later days in Israel. Numbers continues the story of Exodus and leads up to the story of Joshua, and thus is one link in the account of how God shaped for himself a people to carry out his great purpose of redemption for mankind.

**HOW TO READ THE BOOK OF NUMBERS.** Like Leviticus, Numbers was not designed for continuous reading. Much of it consists of laws, statistics, geographical notes, and very little is in story form. Yet two turning points in the Israelites' history are recorded in Numbers. One is the story in chs. 13 and 14 of how the people missed their great chance and so were condemned to live a nomadic life in the wilderness until the older generation died out. The other, described in ch. 20, was when the people gathered at last for their trek to Palestine.

The following are points of special interest:

The Aaronic benediction: ch. 6: 24-26.

The scouts report; the great refusal: chs. 13; 14.

Story of Balaam: chs. 22: 1 to 24: 25; 31: 8.

These passages show how laws then as now often grew out of actual situations and problems:

An example of property laws: chs. 27: 1-11; 36: 1-12.

The cities of refuge: ch. 35: 13-34.

## deuteronomy

THE book of Deuteronomy has something to say to you that you dare not miss hearing. It tells you that it is a matter of life or death whether or not you and the people about you choose to love and to serve God. If you refuse to love and serve him, you will bring down upon yourself numberless evils, but if you respond to God's claim and obey him, you are promised a future in which your life will move toward its true fulfillment. There is no stronger urge in people than the desire to live out life to the full. But there are pitfalls, wrong turnings, false choices, which can rob you of any chance for life. There is such a thing as dying while still going through the motions of living. A book that tells you how to live and not die is supremely important (Deut. 30: 15-20).

Much of the time religion does not seem to be a life-and-death matter to people. Why worry too much about it? You may say: "Surely I am good enough to be able to count on God's taking care of me. God will not be harsh toward anyone who believes in him as much as I do, nor toward any nation that believes in him enough to put on its coins, 'In God we trust.' Things are going to be all right for me and for my nation too." But as you begin to read Deuteronomy the question will be forced upon your mind: What right have I to such confidence?

## A MATTER OF LIFE OR DEATH

Deuteronomy answers that question by saying, No person or nation can ever be sure that things are going to be all right. It all depends!—upon God and upon the relation of that person or nation to God.

Sometimes when you see a person who has fine talents and an attractive personality, you say to yourself, "He has everything that it takes to make a success of life." Deuteronomy warns you against that way of thinking. There are no human resources that can guarantee the kind of success in which life finds its realization. What life is to become depends, for persons as well as for nations, upon man's discovery and acceptance of the destiny that God has for him.

Behind this viewpoint which is so important in Deuteronomy is a conviction that is found in every part of Scripture: that God is sovereign over all the affairs of men. God is not just a spirit of goodness, truth, and beauty in the midst of a vast universe about which he can do nothing; God is the Creator of the world and of man. Man has power to resist the purposes of his Creator and seemingly to go his own way for a time, but he cannot free himself from God or from the laws which God has established as the order of his world.

It is for this reason that your future depends upon God and upon your relation to him. It is folly to try to build your life merely upon an estimate of your own resources, interests, and desires. Your starting point, rather, should be an understanding of what God's purpose is for the whole of human life and what your part in it is to be.

Sometimes you may think how fine it would be to live in a world in which every person could do exactly as he wished. You do not stop to consider that it would have to be a world without any single purpose or meaning governing

its life, without anything to bind it together. Its life would be anarchy. You do not want to live in that kind of world. You want to know that in spite of the darkest and most painful experiences life has meaning and is moving toward a worth-while goal. That is the assurance that you find in what the Scriptures say to you of God. God is Creator and Sovereign and the ordering of your life is in his hands. He asks you to love him with all your heart and soul and strength, and he gives you commandments as guideposts to mark out the path of life. Moreover, he makes it plain that unless you begin by committing yourself wholly to him in love, there is no other way of having either the strength or the understanding to keep the Commandments.

#### THREE MEMORABLE SERMONS

The book of Deuteronomy is written in the form of a number of sermons delivered by Moses to the Israelites when they were camped on the plains of Moab and were about to enter the Promised Land. For a generation they had been living in the desert and, under Moses' leadership, had been learning what it meant to be the people of God. Practically all those who came out of Egypt with Moses were now dead and a new generation had grown up. Constantly there had been rebellion against Moses' plans and an unwillingness in the face of danger and hardship to believe in God's promise for the future, but always there were enough who believed as Moses did to keep him as leader and to keep the tribes from being scattered and lost in the desert. It was, however, a very imperfect nation that camped in the plains of Moab, and as the people moved into Palestine they faced even more severe testings of faith. To add to their uncertainty was the fact that Moses was to die before they left Moab and the leadership was to pass to Joshua. It was a critical hour in the life of Israel, and it was not hard for a later writer to

imagine the thoughts that might have been in Moses' mind and the words he would have spoken to his people in such an hour.

The book consists mainly of three sermons. In the first (chs. 1 to 4), Moses reviews the events of the thirty-eight years since the law was given at Mount Sinai, reminding the people of God's protection and guidance at every stage of the way and appealing to them for continued loyalty to God and his covenant. In the second (chs. 5 to 28), there are set forth not only the Ten Commandments but also a variety of laws for the regulation of the nation's life. The name "Deuteronomy," which means "second law," points to the fact that these laws are for the most part being given a second time, after appearing already in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. The third sermon (chs. 29; 30) is a plea to the people to keep the law faithfully, and it ends with a warning of the consequences of disloyalty. The last chapters of the book tell of the choice of Joshua to succeed Moses and the death of Moses. They contain also two long poems, one in praise of God's goodness to Israel and the other a series of blessings upon the various tribes.

Behind the entire book lies the tradition of Moses' great work as prophet and lawgiver. The impression that he made upon the life of the nation was so great and so deep that more than a thousand years after his time a law was not likely to receive much respect in Israel unless it could be said that it was based on the law of Moses. The authority of Moses for Jews in Jesus' day was similar to the authority of Jesus for Christians today. Thus when Christians seemed to the religious leaders of Judaism to be contradicting the law of Moses (Acts 6: 11), it was as though the very foundations of all true religion were being shattered.

## HOW THESE SERMONS HAVE COME TO US

Between the time of Moses and the time of Jesus, a period of more than twelve hundred years, you would naturally expect a number of editions of a lawbook. With changing conditions and the rise of new problems it was necessary to interpret the law of God in the light of each new age and to make applications particularly suitable to the age. The central principles of the law would remain the same, but it would have to be stated in new ways in order that men might see more exactly what God's will for them was. A careful examination of the books that contain laws—Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy—shows that this is exactly what happened. Some parts, such as the Book of the Covenant, to be found in Ex. 20: 22 to 23: 33, come from very early days. Other parts are clearly from the later time when the Israelites were divided into two kingdoms. The writings as a whole reached their final form after the kingdoms had been destroyed and the nation was scattered. In the days of desert wandering, in the times of national success under David and Solomon, in the days of peril and destruction, in the period of exile—in each time Israel needed to hear the law of God, and there is evidence that as times changed there were faithful interpreters to make clear in the new conditions what God required of his people. But since the central principles of the law were always the same, each new edition was in substance the "Mosaic" law.

In Deuteronomy there is one such edition of the law. It is not the earliest. That is clear from the fact that in it an attempt is made to have all Israelites worship at one sanctuary. The idea of a central sanctuary was prominent in the traditions of Israel from the time of the desert wanderings on, but it was recognized that worship and sacrifice could be

offered at other sanctuaries as well. Men of God worshiped with a good conscience at different sacred places. Samuel knew no law to prevent his offering of sacrifices in Beth-el, Gilgal, Mizpah, or Bethlehem. However, in the eighth and seventh centuries B.C., the prophets found the little local shrines so evil an influence in leading the people astray into crude pagan religious practices that they condemned them and urged their destruction. This practical step, embodied in a law and set down in the book of Deuteronomy, was simply an enforcement of Moses' law, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me."

#### AN ANCIENT BOOK IS REDISCOVERED

There is a story in II Kings, chs. 22; 23, that throws light on the book of Deuteronomy. In 621 B.C., while workmen were repairing the Temple, they came upon a copy of a lawbook. The king's secretary, Shaphan, read it and, seeing at once that it was of great importance, took it to the young king Josiah. Shaphan read it to him, and what Josiah heard overwhelmed him with a sense of his own and his nation's guilt before God. He had it read to all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem and immediately took steps to reform the life and worship of his people. It is reasonable to believe that the book that was discovered and that caused such changes forms the greater part of our present book of Deuteronomy.

You might naturally be curious to know more about this book. How did it happen to be lost and forgotten so that when it was read there was no one who had heard it before? How long before the time of Josiah was it written? What happened to it afterward?

Some facts about the age in which the book was discovered will help to answer these questions. Between 750 and 700 B.C. three great prophets, Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah, spoke

to the people of Israel, warning them that unless the nation turned back to God, it would be destroyed by the Assyrians. Isaiah during a ministry of forty years in Jerusalem built up a fellowship of believers. These men kept his teaching fresh and alive among the people long after he had died. But what gave added force to the message of the prophets was the conquest of the Northern Kingdom by the Assyrians in 722-721 B.C., and the hardships in Judah as a result of its invasion by the Assyrian armies. Many of the people began to see that the prophets had been right. King Hezekiah was persuaded to take steps to abolish idol worship both in the Jerusalem Temple and in the local shrines. It was most likely at this time and as part of this movement that a new edition of the ancient laws of Moses was made with specific applications to the important issues of the time.

When Hezekiah died, however, his successor, Manasseh, changed the policy of the government. No doubt he was afraid that it might offend the powerful Assyrians if people were not permitted to worship the Assyrian gods in the Temple, and he was well aware that a king who interfered with the people's pagan pleasures at the country shrines would not long be popular. Manasseh not only blotted out Hezekiah's reforms, but did everything in his power to stamp out the teachings of the great prophets. In such a time it would be dangerous for anyone to have in his possession a copy of the new lawbook. Any copies that were found would be destroyed. Perhaps it was a priest in the Temple who, in spite of the danger, preserved a copy of this precious book. Each time he finished reading, he may have hid it in some corner where he was sure no one would look. When he died, the book would have remained in its hiding place; and thus, years later and in a new generation that knew nothing even of its existence, it could be discovered by the workmen who were repairing the Temple.

A change had already taken place in Judah in the early years of the reign of Josiah. It was no longer dangerous to be a true believer. The men who placed Josiah upon the throne when he was only eight years old were against the brutal policy of Manasseh and his son Amon. But things were still far from what they ought to be. The effects of more than fifty years of pagan rule could not be undone in a moment. In the various shrines throughout the country there was much more worship of idols than of the God of Israel. There did not seem to be much that Josiah could do. After all, why should he be so narrow-minded as to exclude the worship of other men's gods?

#### A NATION HEEDS AGAIN THE VOICE OF GOD

The tremendous effect of the rediscovered lawbook in such a situation can be well imagined. The whole book was read to Josiah at one sitting, and sentence after sentence must have struck him with overwhelming force. He was hearing God's judgment upon himself and his nation. He and his people had forgotten God; they had forgotten that they were a holy people in covenant with God; they had forgotten that their God was "a jealous God," blessing his people when they were loyal to him, but judging and punishing them when they proved unfaithful. Josiah, as he listened, knew that the choice before him and his people was a life-and-death matter and that perhaps already things had gone so far that nothing could save them from ruin. He undertook at once a wide-sweeping reform of the worship of his people.

How far this reform went is not entirely clear. Jeremiah, who lived in this same time, accused some of the reformers of not going far enough or deeply enough: "They have healed the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly" (Jer. 8: 11). Ezekiel some years later reported that pagan worship of the most hateful kind was still being practiced in the

Temple. In 597 B.C., Jerusalem was overrun by the Babylonians and large numbers of its people carried into exile. In 586 B.C., the city and the Temple were both destroyed.

In exile, however, the lawbook continued to be read, and some passages were added to give it still sharper meaning for the scattered and disheartened exiles (chs. 4: 27-31; 28: 64-68; 30: 1-5). Now, instead of hearing it as Josiah did as a threat of destruction if they failed to return to God, they heard in it the promise of God. If they would return to him with all their hearts, he would place them once again in their own land and give them rich blessings as his people (ch. 4: 29). Thus we see the experiences of more than one generation of Israelites reflected in the book of Deuteronomy.

#### JESUS AND DEUTERONOMY

Deuteronomy is one of the books of the Old Testament that Jesus used most. When he was asked what was the most important Commandment, he quoted Deut. 6: 4, 5:

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength" (Mark 12:29, 30).

When he was tempted by Satan, the words that rose up in his mind to strengthen him against the tempter were verses from Deuteronomy:

"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4; Deut. 8:3); "Thou shalt not make trial of the Lord thy God" \* (Matt. 4:7; Deut. 6:16); "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve" (Matt. 4:10; Deut. 6:13).

Thirty-two verses from Deuteronomy are quoted in the New Testament and eighty other passages refer indirectly to things mentioned in Deuteronomy.

On the other hand, Jesus made it very plain that God's people must pass beyond much that was written in Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy, for good reason, it was taught that all worship should be centralized in one place, but when the woman of Samaria referred to this law (John 4: 20), Jesus informed her that a time had come when men were free to worship God wherever they would turn to him "in spirit and in truth." Deuteronomy taught men to demand "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" (Deut. 19: 21), but Jesus discarded this law and put in its place a new and daring way of dealing with offenses, the return of good for evil and love for hatred (Matt. 5: 38, 39). The law in Deuteronomy permitted a husband to divorce his wife if he found some quality in her that displeased him (Deut. 24: 1-4), but Jesus insisted that among his followers there must be a new and higher relationship between man and wife (Matt. 19: 8, 9). Deuteronomy decreed the death penalty for adultery (Deut. 22: 22; compare John 8: 5), but Jesus stood against the cruelty of such a decree and set in its place a love that could redeem the sinner (John 8: 3-11). This sets upon you as a Christian the responsibility to read the books of the law, not blindly, but as one whose eyes Christ has opened. When you do that, you will still hear in these pages the voice of God calling you to repentance and to wholehearted obedience.

**HOW TO READ DEUTERONOMY.** This is a good book to try reading aloud. Remember that it is largely made up of sermons, and sermons are meant to be heard. Chapters 28; 29; and 30 are particularly good for this use, but the early chapters also have a strong appeal to a listener.

Some laws of special interest (note that these too are expressed in an oratorical rather than a legal fashion):

The Ten Commandments: ch. 5: 7-21. (Note any changes from the more familiar form in Ex., ch. 20.)

An early bankruptcy law: ch. 15: 1-3.

It takes two witnesses to condemn a man to death: ch. 17: 6.

What a king must be and do: ch. 17: 14-20.

When is a prophet not a prophet? ch. 18: 20-22.

Military laws: ch. 20.

A divorce law: ch. 24: 1-4. (See Jesus' comment, Matt. 19: 3 f.)

Laws for the poor: ch. 24: 10-22.



*P A R T   T H R E E*

**historical writings**

*Called in the Hebrew Bible The Former Prophets*

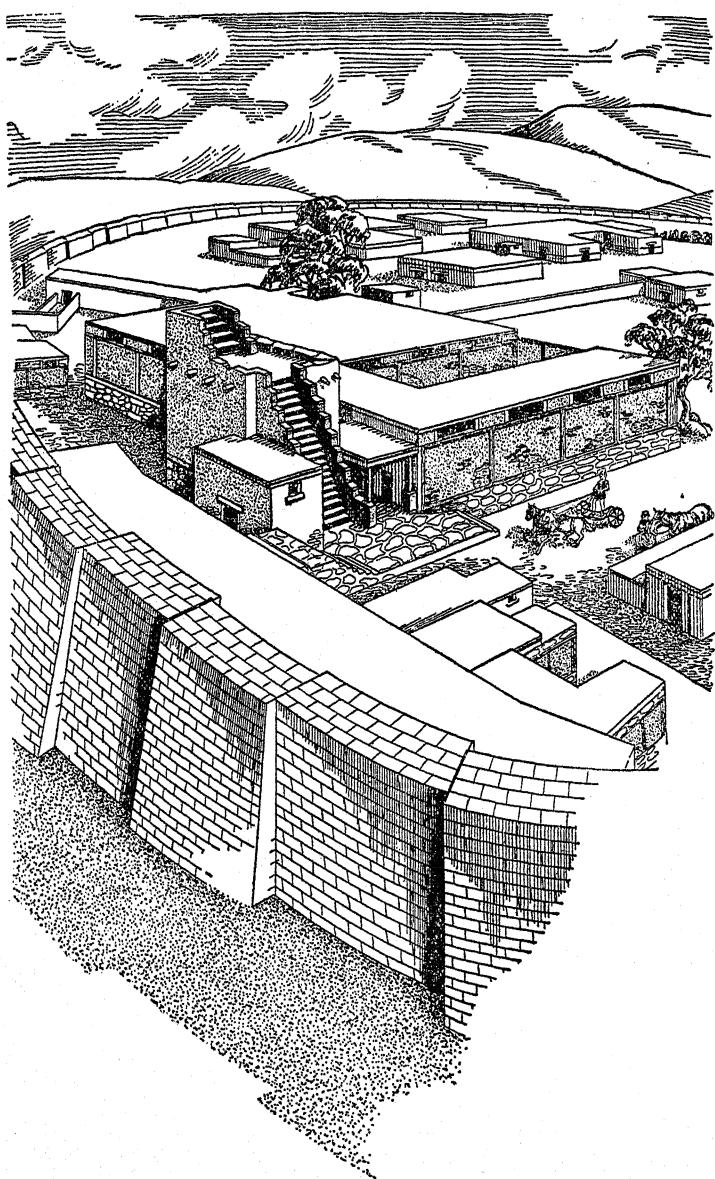
Joshua

Judges

I and II Samuel

I and II Kings

To which are added from The Writings:  
Ruth, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther.



## joshua : judges : ruth

THE Book of Joshua has drawn more criticisms perhaps than any other book of the Bible. Was it really God's will that the Israelites should invade a land that was already occupied by other people? Were they right in thinking that God wanted them to destroy their enemies completely? Is not a God who would have his people kill women and children and babies just because they belong to another nation a savage God unworthy of the worship of a Christian?

### A PROBLEM FOR THE HEART

You ought not to brush these questions aside; rather, you should seek an honest answer. There have been times in the past when Christians have justified extreme cruelty toward their enemies by pointing to The Book of Joshua. And even today there are people who think that if they can show their enemies to be also enemies of God, then it is permissible to act against them with complete ruthlessness and to wipe them out if possible.

It must be admitted frankly that the Israelites under Joshua were as barbarous in some ways as any other people of their time. They used the customary methods of warfare and were cruel as all peoples of that time were cruel. You will do well to remind yourself that after three thousand years and the advantages of the Christian Gospel, modern nations are still in the earlier stages of barbarism so far as

their conflicts with one another are concerned. A few steps have been taken, but very few and very short ones. Modern men with their atom bombs have no right to look down their noses at the Israelites for burning the city of Jericho in order that they might leave no enemy city behind them as they moved forward to conquer the highlands of Judah. Where such things happen we have to say that Christ is not yet obeyed. A Christian dare not justify barbarous cruelties just because they were committed by the Israelites in order to reach a desirable goal.

Nevertheless, you must ask the questions: Were Moses and the Israelites wrong in thinking that it was God's will that they should settle in Palestine? Were they deluded in their conviction that God was leading them to that land? Surely the answer must be an emphatic, "No!" We can see a clear line of divine purpose from earliest days through the settlement in Palestine and on into the later history. Palestine for many reasons seems to be the very land of all lands where it was fitting for God to unfold in the midst of this people his purpose for all humanity. God *was* leading his people into the Promised Land. He *was* caring for them and raising up leaders to keep them from being scattered and destroyed as a people. It was a rude and barbarous age and the Canaanites were cruel antagonists. Contemporary records indicate that they were treacherous in dealing with friends and foes, and that their religion was extraordinarily brutal and immoral. The wonder is that in such an age and among such people God could begin to draw a nation into fellowship with himself and could begin to set upon them the stamp of his divine will and purpose.

#### A NATION SECURES A HOME

The first twelve chapters of The Book of Joshua contain the story of an invasion—the invasion of Palestine by the

Israelite tribes who, forty years before, had been led out of slavery in Egypt by Moses. The fighting was ruthless and the treatment of captured cities was harsh in the extreme. Many of the inhabitants were killed, others were enslaved, and usually the city itself was burned to the ground. The conviction of the Israelites that it was God's plan to give them Palestine as their homeland gave them courage in their assault so that they were able quickly to overcome opposition and to gain a foothold in the hill country. However, it is clear from The Book of Judges that not all the former inhabitants were defeated or destroyed (Judg. 1: 19, 21, 27-33), but that many of them continued to live in the land alongside the Israelites.

One point to keep in mind as you read Joshua is that the conquest of Canaan is a historical fact. Even if not a line of the Old Testament were in existence, archaeologists have dug up evidence in plenty to show how the old Canaanite cities were destroyed and Israelite cities built on the ruins. The Israelite cities, it appears, were at first poor and crude, just as you would expect from what you read in Joshua and Judges. The main lines of the history in Joshua have thus been confirmed from contemporary evidence as genuine and true.

Discoveries by archaeologists who have dug up the ancient cities of Palestine and studied conditions east of the Jordan indicate that the Israelites left Egypt probably in the reign of Ramesses II, about 1290 B.C. By about 1250 B.C., they were ready to cross the Jordan into Palestine. Excavations at some of the cities that are reported in The Book of Joshua as captured and burned have provided evidence that these cities were destroyed about this time. Then, in an Egyptian record of about 1230 B.C., the Pharaoh Merenptah claims to have fought and defeated Israelites. It is clear from this that the Israelites were already in western Palestine.

Here was an important step in the history of God's people. In the days of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, they were a family rather than a nation. In Egypt they were an unorganized mob of slaves. During the years in the desert Moses began to shape them into a nation with a common destiny as a people chosen by God for his service. If, however, the nation was to grow and work out its destiny, it needed urgently to pass from the unsettled, roving life of the desert and to strike roots in some one place. What more strategic homeland for such a people than Palestine, at the very center of the civilized world and at the crossroads of the world's trade routes? The change would bring new difficulties and temptations, but it would also lead Israel into new developments and experiences through which it would become better fitted for its great task.

**HOW TO READ JOSHUA.** The story of the conquest of Canaan is in chs. 1 to 12. In chs. 23; 24 are Joshua's stirring farewell words to his people. Much of the remaining chapters is taken up with geographical notes, which are of great value to the archaeologist but which you may wish to omit in your reading.

Like all military campaigns, those of Joshua can best be followed with the aid of a map. Joshua's tactics were similar to those of other successful warriors. With the map in your Bible dictionary at hand, follow Joshua's campaigns in this order:

1. Preliminary preparations: chs. 1 to 5.
2. Smash through center; the storming of Jericho and Ai; the trick of the Gibeonites: chs. 6 to 9.
3. Sweeping the south: lifting the siege of Gibeon, and battle of Beth-horon: ch. 10.
4. Victory in the north: the battle of the waters of Merom: ch. 11.

## THE BOOK OF JUDGES

Because Israel was called to be the people of God, many modern readers of the Bible expect to find a nation of saints, models of human character and conduct. They get a rude shock when they learn that Abraham through fear could betray his own wife; that Jacob through greed could cheat and lie; that Aaron could make an idol for the people to worship; and that the Israelites in general often could be cruel and barbarous. When you finish reading The Book of Judges, you may find it difficult to understand how a people that seems little removed from a state of barbarism could be the people of God. But you might well go one stage farther and examine the characters of the disciples in the New Testament. They are pictured, not as examples of human perfection, but as men who have all the ordinary failings of human beings. They show jealousy, fear, and sometimes even cowardice; they quarrel and grow impatient; they can be prejudiced and intolerant. How could such men become worthy leaders for a Church of Christ?

But God *did* manage somehow to shape out of the disciples a Church that had remarkable spiritual power and he *did* bring forth out of those barbarous tribes of an earlier time the purest and noblest life in the ancient world. The God of the Bible is a God who can take the savage tribesmen that we see in The Book of Judges and make them into a nation of prophets and teachers for the whole world. It takes centuries, but he can do it. When you get discouraged at the blindness and weakness and perversity of men in this day, you need always to be reminded that God has in other days shaped his people out of the most unpromising human material.

## VISIT THE FOREFATHERS OF YOUR FAITH

If you could be transported to Palestine in the time of the judges, what would you see? Your first surprise might be that the land occupied by the Israelites was so small. The whole of Palestine from north to south is not more than 150 miles, and from east to west it varies from 50 to 80 miles; yet the Israelites did not occupy all of it, but only the mountainous parts. Many of the former inhabitants, the Canaanites, lived alongside them. Some of the Israelites still lived in tents and followed their flocks of sheep wherever they could find pasture. Others had become farmers and had built small houses for their families like the houses of the Canaanites.

The Canaanites in each district had a shrine where they went to worship their gods. There was Baal, the mighty god who was worshiped all through these eastern lands. But there also were lesser gods. The people believed that unless they kept the favor of the gods, neither their crops nor their herds of cattle and sheep nor their families would grow. Most of the Israelites, however much they believed in God who had led them through the desert to the Promised Land, were not inclined to take any chances on offending the gods of the land where they now lived. It seemed to them to be the only safe policy to go along with their Canaanite neighbors and worship as they did.

## A PEOPLE WAYWARD AND WEAK

Joshua, before he died, recognized the danger that his people would quickly degenerate to the level of the Canaanites, not only in religion, but in the whole of life. He called them together to Shechem and made them promise that they would keep themselves from such practices and remain faithful to their covenant with God (Josh., ch. 24).

But the promise was not kept. Most of the Israelites became idol worshipers like their neighbors. In Judg., chs. 17; 18, a story is told of the tribe of Dan moving northward to find a home for themselves and stealing both idols and priest from the house of Micah in Ephraim.

The Israelites at this time were very poor. Their houses have been dug up by archaeologists and the remains show that they lived a bare and simple life with few comforts. The Book of Judges makes clear that for long periods they were not even free. Their land was frequently invaded and they were enslaved by neighboring nations. First there was a Mesopotamian king, then the Moabites from across the Jordan, then Jabin from Syria in the north, then a new invasion of Midianite and Amalekite tribes. Each of these tried to capture the hill country of Palestine and succeeded for a time. They made life miserable for the Israelites, but never did they succeed in dislodging them from their hard-won hills. There was also some fighting among the tribes themselves—Gilead against Ephraim (ch. 12) and a number of tribes against the tribe of Benjamin (chs. 19; 20).

#### THE PEOPLE'S LEADERS

From time to time leaders who were called judges rose up in various parts of the land to win back freedom for the Israelites. They saw God's hand in this, keeping them from being destroyed completely. The heroic deeds of some of these leaders were told and retold in ancient Israel with great delight, and the stories still rank as masterpieces of storytelling. Most of these leaders were products of their time. Samson was a rollicking giant who was remembered, not for any spiritual leadership that he gave his people, but for his deeds of daring against the Philistines. Ehud captured a place of leadership by murdering the king of Moab. Jephthah, after defeating the Ammonites, offered his own daughter

ter as a sacrifice to God because he had vowed to offer whatever living thing first came forth from his house to meet him if he returned victorious (ch. 11: 30, 31, 39). Gideon is represented as a man of real faith, refusing to be king because God alone was Israel's king (ch. 8: 23), and yet it is reported that he set up an image in his city for all the people to worship. Such were the crude limitations even of Israel's leaders in that time.

One of the greatest of the judges was a woman, Deborah. The story of how she rallied the tribes to do battle with the Canaanite army in the northern plain of Esdraelon is twice told, once in prose in ch. 4, and once in a magnificent ancient poem in ch. 5. This poem is one of the earliest pieces of Israelite writing that has been preserved, and its vividness suggests that it was written by an eyewitness of the events. In it you can feel what faith in God meant to Deborah and her people. It was the one source of hope, the one thing that could draw the tribes together and give them strength against their enemies. They were confident that they were not fighting alone. God was in their midst giving them victory.

#### THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

The stories of the judges, robust tales of a nation's youth, were passed down from generation to generation among the Israelites. Some of them are dated as early as 1100 B.C. At a later time, however, most likely in the seventh or sixth century B.C., they were put into their present framework so that they would teach certain great lessons concerning God and his way of dealing with people. This setting can be seen most clearly in ch. 2: 11-23, and can be traced through the chapters as far as ch. 16. First the Israelites forget their own true God and begin to worship false gods; then God gives them into the hands of their enemies who plunder them and

oppress them; but before they are destroyed completely, God raises up a judge, or leader, who conquers the enemy and recovers for them their freedom. When the leader dies, they fall back into the worship of idols again, and the cycle begins afresh. For a nation that was constantly tempted to adopt the pagan worship and practices of the people among whom it lived, this interpretation of history served as a solemn warning as well as a reminder of the unswerving faithfulness of God.

**HOW TO READ JUDGES.** Do not try to "put together" the stories of the judges. Some of these heroes came one after the other and some were contemporaries. If you simply read the stories as they stand, you will find them most impressive and exciting.

The story of the judges comes to an end with ch. 16, the death of Samson. The remaining chapters are an appendix, dealing with incidents that happened earlier in the period. These are of a shocking nature; but the editor of The Book of Judges apologizes for them by pointing out, twice, that those were days when there was no king in Israel and every man did that which was right in his own eyes. If you ever are tempted to think that people would be better off without any government at all, The Book of Judges will remind you of what happens when everybody does as he pleases!

#### THE BOOK OF RUTH

"She's a foreigner! Have nothing to do with her!" Such words were commonly heard in Judah in the days after the Jews returned from the Babylonian Exile. If a young Jew married a foreign girl, there were many who regarded him as a traitor to his own people. Ezra even demanded that Jews who were married to foreign wives should divorce them. So great was the fear of the little Jewish community in

Palestine that it might dwindle away and disappear that it fought bitterly against anything that seemed to weaken it. How could a few thousand Jews in a tiny corner of Palestine hope to carry on the glorious tradition of Israel if they intermarried with people who did not share the faith of Israel? Thus there began to grow up a narrow spirit which fostered the impression that Israel was God's private possession and that foreigners were shut out forever from the blessings of faith in him.

In such a time there appeared a little story of things that happened long, long before, so beautifully told that everyone would read it with delight. This book in the Hebrew Bible is placed among "The Writings." It is a love story, in which the heroine is none other than King David's great-grandmother. Who can resist loving the girl as the story unfolds? In her faithfulness to her mother-in-law, in her devotion to Israel's God, in her generosity, in her modesty, she is everything an Israelite could wish to find in woman-kind. But she is not an Israelite at all; she is a foreigner, a Moabitess!

Thus, dramatically, the author of this book struck a blow against the narrow and cruel prejudice of his time. He did not argue. He did not scold. He did not preach. He set before the eyes of his countrymen a foreign woman who, long before, had become a mother in Israel, a woman whom no Jew could condemn without doing violence to his very soul. He did not have to point the moral of his story or explain what it meant. Every Jew who read it was forced to ask himself: Can it be right, then, to shut out foreigners from our fellowship as though it were impossible for them to share our faith with us? And each man whose sympathy and understanding was captured by the Moabitess Ruth would approach the foreigners of his own time with a new openness and consideration.

There are no great earth-shaking events in The Book of Ruth. Coming to it from The Book of Judges is like passing from a battlefield to a quiet home. It has to do with simple and common experiences of life. But you would be making a serious mistake to think that nothing important is happening here. It is in such quiet scenes of common life that some of the greatest things happen. The foundation of all real achievements both for people and for nations is in homes like this where people are bound to each other by ties of love that nothing can break. The poverty they face brings out only more clearly the nobility of their souls. These are the people and this is the kind of home that comes into being when life is lived in faithfulness to the God of Israel.

**HOW TO READ RUTH.** You need no directions for reading this book. It is a charming short story that you can read as you would read any story in a current magazine.

## Samuel : Kings

**T**HE Bible is a dangerous book. There is dynamite in it. Dynamite blows things to pieces. Some of the teachings of the Bible would blow many things in our world to pieces if people were to take them seriously.

### RELIGION AND POLITICS

The books of Samuel and Kings form a continuous story of approximately 500 years in the history of the Hebrews. If they were printed separately as a modern book, they would make a volume of some 300 pages, which might very well have the title: "The Rise and Fall of the Hebrew Kingdom." It is a story of religion and politics and it contains political dynamite. It is no wonder that Adolf Hitler wanted to get rid of the Old Testament. Anyone who takes seriously the teaching of these books is bound to become an enemy of political tyranny of every kind.

Most people will tell you that religion and politics have nothing at all to do with each other, but the Bible has a different view. The Hebrews were sure that God was concerned with every part of their life, including politics and international affairs. The prophets—Samuel foremost among them—were always ready to fight for the rights of the common people against any attempt, by kings or other men of wealth and power, to enslave them.

Perhaps someone will say: "Of course, the Israelites are more important for us than all the other people of the

ancient world. These people of the Bible are God's people, and if we look at them we shall see an example of what everyone in the world should be like." Whoever gives an answer of this kind shows that he has not read the books of Samuel and Kings with open eyes. It is true that centuries earlier this nation was called by God to be his people, and that they were held together by the conviction that God had chosen them for a special purpose. But there are no signs of moral or spiritual perfection in the people as a whole in all these books. The prophets condemned kings and people alike for behaving exactly like the other nations around them. They were greedy for wealth and power and pleasure. They cheated each other and sold their own countrymen into slavery. Murder was common. Idols were worshiped and superstitions practiced in Israel just as in other countries. Not even David can be held up as an example, because, in spite of his great qualities, he was guilty of murder. You need not be shocked or surprised, therefore, if you find that the Israelites and their leaders in this story are often the very opposite of a holy people and that they do barbarous things that make you shudder.

Why, then, is their story important to you? You can find in any daily newspaper enough about political conflicts and wars and the things men do in their search for wealth and power and pleasure without having to read them in ancient books like these. A prominent person steals another man's wife and you hardly notice it on page 3 of your evening newspaper. David stole another man's wife and the story is preserved for thousands of years as part of the Bible. What makes the difference? What do you find in the Biblical story that you do not find in the newspapers?

The answer can be given in one word: *God*. The newspapers and the history books tell of the doings of men and of nations, but that is all. The books of Samuel and Kings tell

the story of one little nation, but they tell it in a very special way, for the important person in the whole story is God. He is at the center of it. This is what makes the history of a tiny nation like Israel so important to everyone in the whole world. You can find here what you cannot find so clearly anywhere else: the doings of men and nations held up in ruthless contrast to God's will and his purpose for the world. As you read the story of Israel as it is told in this way, you may learn to hold up all history, including that of your own times, for comparison with God's purpose for the world.

#### THE BOOKS OF SAMUEL

The First Book of Samuel begins with the story of a child born in a farmer's home. The home was one where God was worshiped with deep sincerity. It was not unusual in those days for a man to have more than one wife and Elkanah, the husband in the story, had two. His love for one of them, Hannah, was remarkable for its unselfishness and tender concern. Israelite fathers always hoped for many sons, yet, though Hannah was childless Elkanah's love for her did not change. It was a crushing burden upon her soul that she had no son. As the family took part in a sacred feast at Shiloh, she went into the house of God and pleaded with God that she might have a son. In her earnestness she promised that if a son were born to her, she would dedicate him to God's service as long as he lived. Hannah's son was to become a leader through whom a great new day would begin for Israel.

In ch. 2: 1-10, a psalm strikes the keynote of the entire book. It is Hannah's song of thanksgiving, but it could have been sung over and over by any of the faithful in Israel. It proclaims the greatness and the goodness of God: his people should never despair, for nothing is too difficult for God. Rich or poor, strong or weak, a large nation or a small one, makes no difference to him. He can work out his purpose

in spite of his people's poverty and weakness. Without that hope and confidence the Israelites would never have survived as a people.

Samuel next appears as a youth in the sanctuary at Shiloh. He was an assistant to the old priest Eli, who for some time had been the chief leader in Israel. But Eli's sons were a bad lot. Not only did they cheat the people, but they took the lead in drunkenness and adultery at the sanctuary itself. They made the worship at Shiloh as immoral and debasing as the heathen worship of Baal at the neighboring Canaanite shrines. If they had had their way, the Israelites would have forgotten their God entirely and become just like the Canaanites.

#### SETTING NEW FOUNDATIONS

But God did not permit his people to forget him. To the youth Samuel, God gave the terrifying message that the house of Eli was soon to be destroyed because of its corruption.

The agents for carrying out God's judgment in this case were the Philistines. When they had defeated the Israelites and killed the sons of Eli, and when the news of the disaster brought about Eli's death, it seemed to many of the people that there was no future for them at all. They were sure that God had deserted them: "The glory is departed from Israel." So in any nation, when its deeds bring disaster upon it, the whole future seems to be blotted out and God seems to be far away. But what was actually happening in Israel—and what happens in any similar situation in a modern nation—was that God was giving men the opportunity to make a fresh start, by clearing away the rotten structure that they had built. No matter how severe God's judgment may seem to be, if it is received with repentance, it results, not in crushing men, but in giving them hope of a better future.

Under Samuel's leadership great strides forward were made. A purer worship, a more honest administration of justice, and a more earnest teaching of what God required of his people created a new spirit among all the tribes. Israel at that time was a rather loose confederation of tribes in Palestine and Transjordan. They were so weak that they were in constant fear that their neighbors would enslave them, as had so recently happened. Now, under Samuel's leadership, they had strength, at least for a time, to resist the Philistines. But before Samuel finished his days, he met with a severe disappointment. His own sons, who had been appointed to assist him in ruling Israel, were not of the same quality as their father. When they sat as judges, they were bribed by the wealthy to make decisions in their favor. The people were fearful of what would happen when Samuel died. They also saw what strength other nations round about seemed to possess when they were unified under the leadership of a king. They desired a similar strength for themselves. So they came to Samuel and asked him to choose for them a king.

Samuel's warning to the people of what they might lose by having a king is important in view of all that happened later. He pointed out to them that a king's army would take many of their sons, that a king's palace would need many of their daughters for serving maids, and that the cost of all these things would require a heavy tax upon all the people of the land. They could not be a strongly centralized nation under the government of a king and at the same time retain all the freedom that had long been precious to them. But Samuel's warning was not heeded. Centuries later, when Israel had had its fill of kings, there were some who thought it would have been better if Israel had chosen to do without a king, to preserve more freedom for its people, and to have more faith in God.

The man chosen by Samuel to be king was a young man named Saul, who showed his competence when he led the tribes to victory over the Philistines to the west and over the Ammonites to the east. Under his leadership the Hebrews began to be welded into a nation. But after a few years it began to be plain that Israel would not receive from Saul the leadership that it needed. As his power increased he became harsh and tyrannical, self-willed, and little concerned about God's will for the nation. So Samuel, in secret, anointed a new king who at the right time was to succeed Saul.

#### GOD CHOOSES A RULER

When Samuel went to the house of Jesse in Bethlehem, he himself did not know who was to be chosen as king. As the sons of Jesse came before him he was quite impressed with one of them. But he soon learned that his choice was wrong. It was not Samuel's judgment, but God's, that counted in the matter. "Man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart" (I Sam. 16: 7). But when David appeared, at once Samuel was conscious that this was the man of God's choice.

Behind this story lies the conviction that God was deeply concerned about who should be chosen as the ruler of his people. It is most important for the people to find God's man. They must not be deceived by impressive externals, but, like God, must look upon the heart. It is clear also that if God was concerned about the election of a king in Israel three thousand years ago, he is equally concerned about the choice of leaders in communities and nations of the modern world. God asks of his people that they serve him with the *whole* of their life. This cannot be done unless Christians are as much in earnest about doing God's will in their political actions as in their private lives.

David was Samuel's secret choice, but many years were

to pass before David became king. For a time his prowess as a warrior and his skill as a musician made him a favorite at Saul's court, and his friendship with Saul's son Jonathan is one of the loveliest in all history. But as David's popularity grew Saul became increasingly jealous of him, and even tried to kill him. David had to flee for his life. Gathering about him a band of soldiers, he entered the service of one of the Philistine kings. Nevertheless he took care never to be drawn into any battles with his own people. As I Samuel closes, the Philistines have defeated the Israelites in a major engagement and both Saul and Jonathan lie dead on the battlefield. The way is now open for David to become king.

#### THE GREATNESS AND WEAKNESS OF DAVID

The whole of II Samuel is devoted to the story of David as king. David unified the northern and the southern tribes, made Jerusalem his capital, and greatly increased the wealth and power of the nation. Later ages were to look back upon the reign of David as a golden age, and were to think of him as though he were almost a perfect king. They believed that when the ideal king, the Messiah, should come, he would be like David and would be a descendant of David. He would sit on David's throne and would establish an order of perfect justice and peace. II Samuel, much of which is based upon the accounts of eyewitnesses, gives a very different picture of David's reign. David is indeed a great king, but he is no model of perfection. He is a man of earnest faith in God, but he is also capable of ruthless deeds. He keeps the promise made to Jonathan in God's presence and cares for Jonathan's son, but he has all other men of Saul's family put to death in order to make his power more secure. He is able to win the confidence of all the tribes in Israel and to build them into a nation, but he is unable to retain the loyalty of some of his own sons.

According to the account in II Samuel, David was both a success and a failure. He had great success in building the nation. But as he became more powerful he began to think that he could do whatever he pleased. Seeing Bath-sheba, the wife of his neighbor Uriah, he wanted at once to have her as his wife. Uriah was a soldier in David's army, and it was easy to arrange for him to be placed in the front ranks in battle where he was sure to be killed. It was all so simple that David hardly realized the seriousness of what he had done. But there was a prophet of God in Israel who saw clearly what had happened. Nathan came before David and made him see how terrible had been his deed. David was a murderer, and he would have to reckon with God for his offense. David might be king, but there was a King of kings to whom he was responsible. In his repentance David acknowledged that the word of God's prophet had in it more power than the word of a king.

**HOW TO READ THE BOOKS OF SAMUEL.** You can appreciate and understand the books of Samuel by reading the chapters in order just as they appear in your Bible. The following outline may help you to keep the different parts of the story better in mind.

*I Samuel*

Samuel the prophet—boy and man: chs. 1: 1 to 4: 1; 7: 3 to 8: 22.

Eli and his wicked sons: chs. 2: 12 to 3: 18.

God's ark a spoil of war: chs. 4: 1 to 7: 2.

Saul, Israel's first king:

    His rise: chs. 9 to 12.

    His fall: chs. 13 to 15.

    His desperation and defeat: chs. 28; 31.

David the boy—shepherd, musician, giant killer: chs. 16: 1 to 17: 58.

David as army officer: chs. 18 to 20.

David as outlaw: chs. 21 to 26.

David as Philistine vassal: chs. 27; 29; 30.

*II Samuel*

David the king: of Judah, chs. 1 to 4; of all Israel, chs. 5 to 20.

Appendix: various stories and poems about David: chs. 21 to 24.

THE BOOKS OF KINGS

As I Kings opens, David is a very feeble old man. His eldest son, Adonijah, expects to become king. But David names a younger son, Solomon, the child of Bath-sheba, to succeed him, and dies after giving him a solemn charge concerning his responsibilities and dangers.

A WISE KING WHO ACTED FOOLISHLY

Solomon made a promising beginning, building a magnificent Temple in God's honor and professing a very humble faith. But soon he tried to make his nation rival other nations of the time in the splendor of his court, the number of princesses in his harem, the magnificence of his buildings, and the size of his armies. As a man of culture, he introduced the worship of his neighbors' gods into the Temple itself. All these things were a great expense for a small country, and could be paid for only by heavy taxes. Under his rule, the wealth and luxury of the privileged few increased, but the common people who had rallied about David felt themselves oppressed and abused. Solomon, without realizing what he was doing, was destroying the unity of the nation and providing for its downfall.

At Solomon's death the ten northern tribes broke off and formed a separate kingdom, Israel, while the southern part continued as the Kingdom of Judah. The relations between

the two were friendly a good deal of the time, but on a number of occasions war broke out between them. The Northern Kingdom, which was the more powerful and wealthy of the two, was often torn by civil strife, and more than once was invaded by foreign armies. Judah had its internal troubles too, although they were less severe than those in Israel. And Judah suffered less from conquest, for its high, bare hills were less attractive to plundering invaders. The Kingdom of Israel came to an end in 722-721 B.C., when the Assyrians marched in and destroyed Samaria. Judah, though greatly weakened, continued for more than a century longer but finally had to bow to the Babylonian conqueror. Thus as the story in the books of Kings closes, the Israelites are an exiled and scattered people. Their eyes are turned toward Palestine, however, as the place where one day they hope to assemble again as a nation.

#### NATIONS MUST CHOOSE

The account of these centuries falls into a pattern that repeats itself. The reign of each king is evaluated according to whether he was faithful or unfaithful to God, and often not much more is told concerning him. Thus, through the story of Israel's kings, it was constantly being driven home upon the minds of the readers that the only sure foundation for the life of any nation was obedience to the will of God, and that rebellion against God was sure to result in ruin. It is a simple lesson, and yet nations in the modern world are still far from acknowledging its application to their practical affairs.

#### THE PROPHETS

In the latter part of I Kings and in the whole of II Kings the prophets receive much more careful attention than the kings. Elijah, Micaiah, and Elisha are the heroes of Israel

in the mind of the historian. It is surprising, however, that such great prophets as Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, and Jeremiah, who lived in the period covered by the books of the Kings, are not even mentioned. It is necessary to read the books that bear their names to see just where they fit into the history as given in Kings and to realize what a great part they played in the life of the nation.

#### A PROPHET SPEAKS OUT AGAINST SIN

Elijah's great work was to stem the tide of Baal worship which at one time threatened to become the faith of all Israel, so much so that Elijah himself in a dark hour believed that the cause of the true God had been lost. The Old Testament writers, one and all, are opposed to Baal worship. They are not in the least tolerant of it. This attitude might sometimes irk a modern reader, who has been brought up in the belief that the state should not interfere with freedom of worship, and that all religions should be tolerated, whatever they may be. If a man wants to worship Baal, why not? Is it so very wrong to worship God by some other name?

The fact is that the worship of Baal was not simply an innocent matter of using a different name for God. It was a grim, sinister, and violent religion. We know a good deal about it, not from the Old Testament writers alone, but from other sources. In its popular and common form, it was a manifestation of polytheistic belief. According to the Canaanite mythology of that day, Baal was one among a number of gods. He was thought of as the very important god of life and fertility.

Superstitious Israelites would consult their Canaanite friends about what to do to make sure that the crops would be plentiful and that the cows would have healthy calves. The Canaanite farmers would say, among other things, that of course Baal, who was a nature god of life and fertility, had

to be kept in a good humor. So the Israelites would worship Baal along with the Lord of heaven and earth whom their ancestors had covenanted to serve. Against all this the prophets taught the religion of the one and only God, the Creator, who needs no other gods to help him and in whose hands are all things.

A second reason why there could be no compromise with Baalism was that it was a wicked religion. Sacred prostitution and child sacrifice were important elements in it. Public worship culminated in a sexual orgy in which all participated. No wonder the prophets, from beginning to end, were so bitter against this debasing religion.

A third reason for their opposition became evident in Elijah's time. Baalism itself was intolerant. The representatives of Baal began to insist that everyone had to worship him. So the prophets of the true God could not afford to come to terms with Baal. With a religion that substituted a whole set of mythological deities for the one true God; a religion that encouraged the most brutal sins on the part of its followers; a religion that aimed at dominance, there could never be compromise.

#### FAITH IS THE VICTORY

Elijah was certainly not a man to compromise. He had a powerful force against him, none other than Queen Jezebel herself, who had been a Tyrian princess before her marriage with Ahab. She brought with her to Samaria the worship of the Tyrian Baal, and set out to make it the state religion of Israel. When the prophets resisted, she angrily determined to destroy them and their religion with them. She came dangerously close to succeeding—so close that at one time Elijah thought that she had won. He had to learn from God that there were still seven thousand persons in Israel who had not bowed the knee to Baal.

Elijah's battle was a heroic one. He could not have gone on had it not been for his faith that God was stronger than all the human forces pitted against him, and that in some way God would win through. On Mount Carmel, in a dramatic scene, he put the power of God and the power of Baal to a test, and when Jezebel's prophets of Baal were defeated, he took advantage of the momentary triumph to destroy as many of them as possible. This may seem like a savage act for a prophet of God, but it must be remembered that to Elijah it was an attempt to free his country from degenerate leaders who were intent upon ruining it both in body and in soul. It was the act of a patriot. It led, however, only to more violence and brought no effective solution of the problem.

Micaiah too was a man of great courage. Confronted with a ruler who wished him to speak in support of the official state policy, he refused to do so. Instead, he asserted in the name of God that the policy would lead to disaster (I Kings, ch. 22). For this he was punished, but his word proved true. Elisha, in comparison with Elijah and Micaiah, appears more as a worker of wonders than as a spokesman for God. Yet he too played his part in the conquest of false religion and his influence was felt in the highest circles of government.

#### HOW THESE BOOKS CAME TO BE WRITTEN

You can tell when these books came into their present form by noticing where their story ends. As II Kings closes, Jerusalem has been destroyed, and the king, with a large number of his people, has been deported to Babylonia. The fall of Jerusalem occurred in 586 B.C. The last event mentioned in II Kings is the release from prison in Babylon of King Jehoiachin, who had been carried away from Jerusalem in 597 B.C.; this release occurred in 561 B.C. It is clear therefore that the final writing of this history was done in

exile sometime shortly after 561 B.C. It is likely, however, that a number of men worked at it over a period of years, gathering the materials and fitting them into a single story, and that much of the work was already done in 600 B.C. before Jerusalem was destroyed. It would be much easier to write such a history at a time when it was possible to consult ancient records in the Temple and in the royal archives of Jerusalem than at a later day when the Jewish people were in exile.

#### A TRACT FOR THE TIMES

This history was written with a very special purpose, and not just from an interest in setting down facts about the past. As the Kingdom of Judah came to a tragic end and it seemed as though Israel as a nation were being completely destroyed, men asked: "Why has God let this happen to us? Were we not his own chosen people? Then why have our enemies triumphed over us?" Others said: "It is plain that we were mistaken. There is no God, or if there is, he has no special care concerning us." Men whose teachers had been the great prophets took up the challenge of these questions. They set themselves to tracing the story of the kingdom to show that God had indeed been at work in the midst of Israel, calling this people to a high destiny and to a life under his rule such as no other nation had ever known. But again and again Israel had taken the wrong turn and made the wrong choice. God sent his prophets to recall them to their destiny and to keep them from making themselves just like any other nation, and always there were some who repented and believed. But for the nation as a whole, one disastrous sin followed upon another. Thus, by their rejection of God's justice and holiness, the people brought ruin on themselves, first upon Israel and then upon Judah.

Always in the story, however, there was something that

could kindle fresh hopes in a discouraged Israel. When God had punished his people in the past, it was never to destroy them, but to turn them from the evil of their ways. And whenever there was a true repentance and turning back to God, the most amazing things happened, for God was able to bring life out of death and victory out of seeming defeat.

This history was therefore a "tract for the times," a message to Israel in story form, a call for the people to confess frankly their sins against God that he might forgive them and open before them a new and brighter future.

#### MANY ANCIENT SOURCES

The writers of this history made use of many ancient documents. Some of the records came from the very time in which the events happened and seem to have been written by eyewitnesses. This is particularly true of some of the stories of David. Special mention is made of a "book of the Chronicles of the kings of Israel" (I Kings 14: 19) and a "book of the Chronicles of the kings of Judah" (I Kings 14: 29). These were doubtless histories of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms which had been compiled earlier but which are now lost, except for parts of them which are incorporated in the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles. There were also records kept in the Temple and court histories which listed the achievements of the various kings. Sometimes a later writer did not blend his materials completely as he told the story, and the different documents he used can be recognized. Sometimes he would use stories about the same person that came from two different sources. Thus there are two different accounts of David's first meeting with Saul and his introduction to the royal court (I Sam. 16: 18 to 23 and chs. 17: 55 to 18: 2), and similar double accounts at a number of points. But wherever the writers found their materials, they built them into one great story.

in which all Israelites could see that when their forefathers trusted in political power or great wealth or a culture like that of other nations, they forgot their true destiny as God's people and lost the very foundation of their life as a nation.

HOW TO READ THE BOOKS OF KINGS. You can read straight through these books for the general sweep of Israelite history without trying to distinguish very clearly which king came after which. But if you want to straighten them out, see the table of chronology beginning on page 265 of this book. The following divisions may help you in your reading:

The reign of Solomon: I Kings, chs. 1 to 11.

The great secession: chs. 11: 26 to 12: 24.

The kings of Judah and Israel: I Kings 12: 25 to II Kings, ch. 16.

Israel falls: II Kings, ch. 17.

Judah carries on alone: chs. 18 to 23.

The finding of the lawbook: chs. 22; 23.

Final defeat and exile: ch. 24.

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The stories of Elijah are mostly in I Kings, chs. 17 to 21; II Kings 1: 2 to 2: 11.

Micaiah, a little-known, but extraordinary, prophet, appears in I Kings, ch. 22.

Elisha's story is in I Kings 19: 15-21; II Kings 2: 1 to 8: 15; 9: 1-10; 13: 14-20.

Sennacherib's great invasion is in II Kings, chs. 18; 19.

chronicles  
ezra nehemiah : esther

**I**N MOST books that you read you expect the story to keep going forward. That is what has been happening thus far in your reading of the Bible. You began with the Creation, then centered your attention on a family that was chosen especially for the service of God. You watched that family in Egypt growing into a nation and in its exodus from Egypt receiving God's law as the foundation of its life. As the nation settled in Palestine, new struggles began, against invaders from without and against forgetfulness and unfaithfulness which threatened to destroy it from within. Always, however, God raised up leaders for his people and brought them through. Then came what seemed to be great days, when David and Solomon ruled a united kingdom and commanded the respect of surrounding nations. The forces of disunity were too strong, however, and soon the kingdom split in two. Centuries passed, with the nation constantly being torn by forces which drew it two ways at once. On the one hand were prophets who tried to recall it to its true destiny as a people of God; on the other hand, leaders who desired for Israel the kind of successful life that they saw in more powerful neighboring countries. The prophets seemed to fail, for first the Northern Kingdom went down to ruin before the Assyrians and then Judah before the Babylonians. Jerusalem, with its Temple, was destroyed, and eventually the people were scattered through

many lands. But now it became clear that the prophets had not failed. What God had been doing among his people for centuries could not be destroyed or restrained by any human power. Israel did not die. Rather, in the midst of disaster there came to birth in the Israelites a new conviction of their divine destiny.

## THE BOOKS OF CHRONICLES

Thus far had the story progressed at the end of II Kings. But as you turn the page and begin I Chronicles you find yourself reading the names of Adam, Sheth, Enosh, and Noah! In short, you are back at the beginning again. After nine chapters of name lists you come upon the story of Saul's death which you had already read at the end of I Samuel. The remainder of I Chronicles is devoted to stories of David's achievements as king. II Chronicles continues with Solomon and all the kings of Judah and finally brings the story a little farther forward than it was in the last chapter of II Kings. Not until you come to the books of Ezra and Nehemiah do you find the story moving forward again to tell what happened to Israel in the centuries after the break-up of the kingdom.

Why is part of the story of Israel repeated in this way? We get the beginning of an answer by looking in the Hebrew Bible and finding that the books of Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah are widely separated from the books of Samuel and Kings; in fact, they come at the very end in the section called "The Writings." The Greek translators first put them where they now stand, and the English Bible follows the Greek, not the Hebrew, order. They belong among the books of the Old Testament that were written latest. Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah originally formed one work, and must be read together if you would understand what the author was trying to do: he was retelling the story

of Israel from the standpoint of one who lived long after the nation had recovered the center of its life in Judah, and when the Temple at Jerusalem had become the focus of the spiritual life of the whole people. Somewhere between 400 and 300 B.C. seems to be the time when the books were written.

Why would a Jew in the Jerusalem of that period wish to rewrite the history of his nation? Why was he not satisfied with the account that he already possessed and that is preserved in the earlier books of the Bible? Why did he not content himself with adding a book that would carry the story of Israel forward to his own day? The simplest way to answer these questions is to show the changed situation and outlook at the time when these books were written.

#### JERUSALEM IN THE TIME OF THE CHRONICLER

If we could look into the Jerusalem and Judah of that time, we could not help feeling sympathy for the little community that was struggling bravely to maintain its life against heavy odds. The high, bare hills of Judah did not offer more than a frugal living to their inhabitants. Many Jews whose homes were in Babylonia or Egypt were much more prosperous than their brethren in Palestine, and the younger generation in Palestine was constantly attracted by the advantages and opportunities of life in other lands.

By the time *Chronicles* was written, Judah had been a province first of one empire, then of another. There were the Babylonians, then the Persians. After the Persians came the Greek world empire of Alexander the Great. Each empire had its day and levied its taxes on Palestine, but the little Jewish community outlasted them all. It was ruled, not by a king, but by the high priest, for nothing was more important to it now than its religion, and the Temple was the center of its life. But even the Temple had little about

it to inspire pride. To those who had seen the magnificent temples of other lands it seemed tiny and insignificant. There was no wealth in Judah sufficient to build a great temple or to provide furnishings for it such as every Jew would have liked to see.

It was not easy to keep the people faithful to their religion. They had neighbors who did not share their faith in the God of Israel, but gave adherence to other religions. Jews who intermarried with them were often drawn away from their faith. Strict laws against such marriages had been enacted. Then the foreign conquerors brought with them into Palestine their pleasant ways of life and their easy-going worship of many gods. Obedience to the laws of God seemed much less interesting to many Jewish youths than the kind of life offered by the newcomers.

Another thorn in Judah's flesh was Samaria, to the north. There had been bad feeling between the two communities for generations. After the fall of Samaria in 722-721 B.C., foreigners were settled in the former Northern Kingdom by the conquering Assyrians, but some of the Israelites had remained in the district, and in time their religion prevailed as the religion of the community. Their Bible, at a later date, consisted of the first five books of the Bible, and they had a temple of their own. When Jerusalem was being resettled and rebuilt, the Samaritans interfered and tried to prevent the restoration, perhaps fearing for their own safety if Jerusalem became strong again. The people of Jerusalem insisted that the Samaritans had no share in the true faith and refused to have anything to do with them. Sometimes it seemed as though the Jews, in their attempt to keep their people loyal to the faith, were becoming narrow and harsh and were forgetting that God's people had a mission to make God known and obeyed among all nations.

## THE PURPOSE OF THE CHRONICLER

The editor of the books of Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah wished to encourage the faith of the Judeans of his day. The former history in Samuel and Kings had been written to call the nation to repentance for its past sins and to show that God always did great things for his people when they turned to him with their whole heart. This later history was intended to reassure the people of Judah that they were indeed the people whom God had chosen for his service, and that a wonderful care of God had preserved them in spite of every disaster. How could they be discouraged when they looked back over seven hundred years of history and saw all the great things God had done for them in the past? If there were disasters it was because of the people's unfaithfulness and not because of any unwillingness of God to bless them.

This aim of the Chronicler to encourage his people had a very definite effect upon the way in which he told the story. He was not interested in showing the sins of David and Solomon, which stood plainly written in Samuel and Kings, for he wanted his people to know that Israel in the past had kings as great as the kings of Persia, Egypt, and Syria. David and Solomon, in his story, stand out therefore as models of kingly wisdom and as zealous patrons of the Temple and the priesthood. He also attributed to David and to later kings of Judah huge armies, in his desire to compare their power favorably with that of the conquerors of a later day.

A similar motive made the Chronicler dwell at great length upon the glories and ceremonies of Solomon's Temple. The present Temple in Jerusalem might not seem very impressive when compared with the temples of the Egyptians and other nations, but if the people who belittled their

own Temple could have seen the magnificent structure that Solomon built and the impressive rituals in it, they would know that no temple in all the world could ever compare with it.

As for the Samaritans, with their claim to be God's people equally with the Judeans, the most crushing answer was to show how from the time when the northern tribes broke away from Judah there had been nothing but evil in the north. While the Northern Kingdom was consistently faithless, Judah, though far from perfect, preserved an unbroken tradition of faithfulness.

It was comforting and encouraging for Judeans to read such an account of their history. It gave them a renewed sense of their importance among the nations of the earth. There was little in it, however, of the spirit of the prophets.

#### THE CHRONICLER A PRIEST

On the contrary, the Chronicler was a priest, or strongly in sympathy with the priests. You will see later on, when you study the prophets, what a difference there was between the prophetic and the priestly view of religion. One thing that characterized the priests was their love of outward forms. The chanting in the magnificent Temple, the sacrifices, the lighting of the candlesticks, the opening and closing of the impressive doors, all this seemed of the greatest interest and importance to the Chronicler. So in his account of David, he deals at great length with the king's special interest in the Temple and his contributions to it. Great space is given to lists of Temple attendants, members of the choir and orchestra; even the janitors are given careful mention.

The prophets had a more searching test of what loyalty to God means. But in the Chronicler's whole story such great prophets as Elijah, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah

are hardly mentioned. It would not be good if the people depended upon the Chronicler alone for a knowledge of their nation's past. They might forget what God once said to them through the prophets and through the prophets' interpretation of their history in Samuel and Kings. And a nation that forgot the prophets would be a nation that no longer knew its God! That would be true no matter how sure they were that they were God's people and no matter how zealous they were about their religion and the Temple.

Nevertheless in the Chronicler's story there is a clear call to faith in the God of the fathers. His love for all things that had to do with the worship of God kindled in them the spirit of worship. And still today there are riches of prayer and devotion for the Christian worshiper in these pages.

**HOW TO READ CHRONICLES.** If you are fairly familiar with the story of David and Solomon from Samuel and Kings, it will interest you to read through I and II Chronicles to see how differently the Chronicler treats these men: to note what he adds that is not in Samuel or Kings, what is omitted, and what parts of the story are changed. Seek to discover reasons for these differences.

The following are points of special interest:

David's explanation why he himself did not build the Temple: I Chron. 22: 6-16.

Solomon's prayers: II Chron. 1: 7-12; 6: 14-42.

The Temple of Solomon: II Chron., chs. 2 to 5.

A prophet who preached kindness to a nation's enemies: II Chron. 28: 1-15.

#### THE BOOKS OF EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

These two books are our main sources of knowledge about the history of the Jews in the century and a half after the Exile. But they do not tell us very much. They give

us only a few glimpses into the things that were happening in two widely separated periods.

You can imagine the situation in Babylonia in the year 540 B.C. just before the story in The Book of Ezra opens. There were Jewish exiles in many lands but the largest colonies of them were in Babylonia. Fifty-seven years before (597 B.C.) the parents and grandparents of the present exiles had made the weary journey from Palestine. Eleven years later (586 B.C.), when Jerusalem was destroyed, many of their friends had followed them. At first there was great unrest and an eagerness on the part of many to get back to Palestine. But with the passing of the years the people became established on farms and in business, and many of them were more prosperous than they could ever have been in Jerusalem.

Some Jews quickly adopted Babylonian ways, including their religion, but there were others whose constant thought was to keep alive the faith they had brought with them from Judah. They warned each new generation born in exile against the peril of unfaithfulness, and sought to teach them the essentials of their nation's ancient faith. There were history books which the scholars had carried with them, from which every Jew could learn the story of God's dealings with his people from the very beginning. No one could hear that story and doubt that God had called Israel to great things. But it was heartbreaking to see how by stubborn rebellion against God this people had brought disaster after disaster upon itself.

One great problem, even for the faithful, was to keep from despair. It seemed impossible that there should be any future for the Jews as a nation. Scattered through many lands, they seemed doomed to disappear, by being absorbed into the populations of the lands where they lived. It seemed as though God had cast them off.

The news from Palestine in those days was not good. Jerusalem was still in ruins, and the inhabitants of Judah had no protection against marauding neighbors. Many of the people were living in caves for the sake of safety. The whole outlook seemed hopeless—and yet there had been equally hopeless situations in the past when suddenly God opened a way where there seemed to be no way.

In the year 538 B.C. the seemingly impossible happened. The Jews were set free to return to Jerusalem. Proud Babylon fell before a new world conqueror, Cyrus of Persia. The city did not even resist, but opened its gates to the armies of Cyrus. And one of Cyrus' first acts was to permit the exiled Jews to return to the land of their origin.

Some of the Jewish people did not choose to return to Palestine. It would be a long journey, involving months of tedious travel. Many were too old to make it in safety. Others had established successful business enterprises in Babylonia and were unwilling to give them up to face the uncertainties of life in Palestine. They preferred simply to help the rest with gifts of money. Then there were some whose families had become more Babylonian than Jewish, to whom it seemed foolish for anyone to return to Palestine.

#### REBUILDING IN PALESTINE

If you could look into Jerusalem about the year 537 B.C. you would find that the difficulties were greater than anyone had expected. Not only did the people have to face the problems of resettling a devastated land, but they had bitter opposition from the community to the north in Samaria. The Samaritans were afraid that if the returned exiles rebuilt Jerusalem they would become too strong and would want to establish their authority in the land as well. The Samaritans sent a protest to the king of Persia, and his officers ordered the Jews to stop their rebuilding.

Not until the year 515 B.C. was there a Temple ready for worship. After the first attempt to build it was stopped, the people became engrossed in their own concerns. But in 520 B.C. the prophet Haggai took the whole community to task because so many fine houses had been built while as yet there was no house for the worship of God. At the urging of Haggai and his fellow prophet Zechariah, Jeshua, the high priest, and the governor, Zerubbabel, set to work. Everyone had to help. Naturally, the Temple that was built did not compare with the one that had formerly stood on the same spot. And it was not nearly so fine as the ones the exiles had seen in Babylonia. But at least it was a place where the worship of God could be carried on with dignity. The years had been discouraging ones. When the Jews left Babylonia, they thought that great things would happen as soon as they reached Palestine. But one year of hard work followed another without any notable developments. They seemed, rather, to be fighting just to exist. It was not easy to go on believing that through them God was going to work out his great purpose for the world.

#### EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

After 515 B.C. practically nothing is known of what happened to the Jews until nearly halfway through the next century. Ezra, chs. 7; 8, describes a second expedition from Babylonia to Jerusalem, which took place under the leadership of Ezra, who was both a scribe and a priest. According to some scholars, the date of this expedition was 458 B.C., but others now place it after Nehemiah, about 428 B.C. Over a thousand people came with Ezra and brought with them treasures that would be welcome in the poverty-stricken community.

One day in 445 B.C. messengers arrived from Palestine at the royal palace of the Persian Empire in Susa. To their

fellow Jew, Nehemiah, who held a high position in the king's service, they brought word that the walls of Jerusalem were still in ruins and the community in a very sad plight. Nehemiah secured permission from the king to visit Jerusalem, and also was appointed to serve as governor on behalf of the Persians while he was there.

Nehemiah himself tells the story of his journey, the condition in which he found the city and the obstacles he encountered, in a memoir which occupies a large part of the book that bears his name (Neh. 1: 1 to 7: 5; 12: 27 to 13: 31). We become acquainted with him not only as an efficient administrator but as a man of very earnest faith and prayer who cared deeply for his people. His achievement was in the field of government rather than religious teaching. Through his strategic marshaling of the resources of Judah and reconstruction of the defenses of Jerusalem, he made possible a measure of real security for the community. But to him this was a service of God which he could not withhold, no matter how great were the difficulties and sacrifices involved. The preservation of his scattered people for the future depended in a large measure upon maintaining the little community in Palestine as a center for the loyalty and traditions of Jews everywhere.

These fragmentary records of the return in 538 B.C., of the expedition under Ezra, and of the work of Nehemiah, were put together by the writer of *Chronicles* to form a continuation of the new history of his people that he was preparing. Though they give us only a few glimpses into the period, we are able to reconstruct in some measure the life of the people. They were reading and digesting the books of history and the books of the prophets that had come down to them as an interpretation of all that God had been doing with Israel. Thoughts from these books were filling the minds of many youths. And though no great prophet was

to be heard again for centuries, faith was to find utterance in other ways, in psalms and proverbs, in a dramatic poem such as The Book of Job, or in a striking story such as The Book of Jonah. Moreover, through these years the treasures out of the past, books of many different kinds which expressed in some way the faith of Israel, were to be gathered together and preserved for ages yet to come.

**HOW TO READ EZRA AND NEHEMIAH.** By this time you do not need to be told to skip name lists if you feel like it. The main story sections of these books are:

The return from exile: Ezra, ch. 1.

Building the Temple: Ezra 3: 6 to 4: 5; 5: 1 to 6: 15.

The story of Ezra (who was probably not even born when the above events took place) is found in Ezra, chs. 7; 8: 15 to 10: 19, 44. Another incident in which he took a leading part is in Neh., ch. 8. Here for the first time we find the Law as an authoritative collection of books.

Nehemiah tells his own story. Much space is given to prayers. Note the long, elaborate prayers of repentance on behalf of the nation, in Ezra, ch. 9, and Neh., ch. 9; also the numerous very short prayers of Nehemiah.

#### THE BOOK OF ESTHER

The setting of the story of Esther is the court of the Persian king in Susa. In the opening scene the king has been celebrating with the nobles of his empire and has on display the treasures of his palace. But when he calls for his queen, Vashti, to come and show her beauty for the entertainment of his guests, she deeply offends his royal dignity by refusing. In punishment she is removed from being queen, and from among the multitude of candidates to succeed her a young Jewish orphan, Esther, is chosen.

Mordecai, the cousin of Esther, who has been her guard-

ian, is an important person in Susa. He has shown his loyalty to the king by disclosing a plot of two officials against the king. He gives offense, however, to Haman, the prime minister of Persia, by his unwillingness to bow in reverence before him. Haman's furious anger directs itself, not merely at Mordecai, but at all Jews in the empire, and he determines to destroy them.

In the palace, Esther at first is unaware of the catastrophe in store for her people, but finally word reaches her. Mordecai appeals to her to risk even her own life if necessary in order to save her people. Esther makes her plan. The first step is to invite Haman and the king to a banquet. Haman, unaware of the queen's relationship to Mordecai, proceeds with his plot against the Jews, and has a great gallows erected for the hanging of Mordecai. But events take a sudden turn; the king discovers Mordecai's earlier act of loyalty and commands Haman to do Mordecai honor in the city. Then at the banquet in the queen's rooms Haman is forced to listen as Esther exposes his whole plot to the king. The swift outcome is that Haman is executed upon the gallows he had expected to use for Mordecai, and Mordecai is given Haman's position as prime minister.

Then by order of the king the Jews are permitted to arm themselves against their enemies. On the day of the proposed slaughter of the Jews the tables are turned and their enemies are destroyed.

The question must be asked frankly: What has this story to say to Christians today? Among the Jewish people it has long been associated with the Feast of Purim, and was perhaps written to explain the origin of that festival (ch. 9: 19 ff.). One can understand the strong appeal of the story to a people who in age after age have suffered severely at the hands of their enemies. But what are Christians to say of the note of vengefulness upon which the book ends,

glorying in the destruction of men, women, and children who have been hostile to the Jews? What also are they to say of the fact that nowhere in it is there any mention of God or any concern about God's purpose for Israel such as we find elsewhere in the Old Testament?

A Christian must acknowledge these limitations of The Book of Esther at once. He remembers that when these things were written, Christ had not yet come to replace vengefulness with love. Nevertheless, The Book of Esther has a very definite word to speak to men in the twentieth century. A generation that has seen six million Jews slaughtered and tortured and burned to death in Europe, and that is still remarkably tolerant of anti-Jewish propaganda, might well hear in this book a warning from God. It is dangerous to play the part of Haman, for in history it has happened again and again that Haman has been hanged on his own gallows. Not once, but many times, the Jews have seen the downfall of regimes that persecuted them.

The character of Haman is a representation of Jew haters in many ages. There is one Jew who offends him, but his anger is not limited to that one Jew. It is extended to all Jews without distinction. If a Persian colleague had roused Haman's anger, he would not have been angry with all Persians. He would have judged each Persian on his own merits. But when a Jew was concerned, it was different.

The underlying cause of recurring enmity toward the Jews is suggested in Haman's accusation of them before the king: "Their laws are diverse from all people; neither keep they the king's laws." He was expressing the resentment of a community at a body of people within it who seemed to be living according to standards different from those of the rest of the citizens. It was not just that some of their customs were different, but that they acted as though there was some higher authority than the king of Persia to

be obeyed. Situations could arise in which they would have to obey this higher authority and disobey the king!

What have we here except the ruling idea of both the Old Testament and the New, that man's unconditional loyalty and obedience must be given to God alone and that every human government must be regarded as subordinate to the rule of God? But if this was a source of hatred toward the Jews in the ancient world, it must be recognized as equally the source of hatred for the Christian Church in some modern states.

Christians will do well to understand that there is a deep connection between antagonism to the Jews and antagonism to the Christian Church. It does not show immediately on the surface, but the one leads on inevitably to the other. Members of the Church who walk even a few steps in the footprints of Haman and who tolerate in themselves some vestiges of anti-Semitism should be shocked by The Book of Esther into the realization that they are enemies of the people of God.

This historical romance was written about the third century B.C. The setting of the story, however, goes back some two hundred years to a time when Persia was the great political power in the Near East.

**HOW TO READ ESTHER.** This is a dramatic short story and should be read at one sitting.

*P A R T   F O U R*

**poetic And wisdom writings**

*Found in the Hebrew Bible*

*Among The Writings*

Job

Psalms

Proverbs

Ecclesiastes

The Song of Songs



## poetic AND wisdom BOOKS

**W**ITH The Book of Job, you come to a section of the Old Testament that breaks away from the continuity of the history recorded up to this point. Furthermore, the order of the books departs radically from the order given in the Hebrew Bible. You will remember that the Hebrew Bible is arranged in this way:

The Law; The Prophets; The Writings. The Prophets in turn are subdivided into The Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings) and The Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, The Twelve Minor Prophets).

In the last main section of the Hebrew Bible, which is called "The Writings," the book of Psalms comes first. After Psalms are found Proverbs, Job, The Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles. But in the Greek translation and also in the Latin Vulgate translation, the order of the Writings was changed, and they were not all put in one place. The English Bible follows the order of the Vulgate, where Ruth is placed just after Judges because it tells a story from those times. Lamentations is put after Jeremiah on the theory that it was written by that prophet, and Daniel is put after Ezekiel because Daniel was thought of as a prophet. But all the rest of the Writings are placed in a new order, between the Former and Latter Prophets. In this arrangement the following prose Writings come first, in chronological order: Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther. Then come certain

"poetic" and "wisdom" Writings in another group in this order: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, The Song of Songs.

#### HEBREW POETRY

Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and The Song of Songs, are recognized as "poetic" books in the Old Testament, but, as a matter of fact, there is poetry in other books: Lamentations is all poetry, while in the prophets, and here and there in the books of the Pentateuch there are occasional sections that are poetic. It is not likely that you will be able to recognize all the poetic passages in the Old Testament unless you have a version that prints these sections in the form of poetry. Your inability to recognize all the poetic passages may be charged, not alone to the form in which your English Bible is printed, but also to the very real differences that exist between Hebrew or other Semitic poetry and the poetry of the English language.

In a general way poetry may be said to have the characteristics of imaginative expression and of some kind of versification. Hebrew poetry possesses these characteristics, although it does not usually have rhyme, nor do its lines have rhythm and meter in the same way as English poetry. In Hebrew poetry the basic unit is the verse, which is written as a single line in Hebrew. Sometimes, however, verses are grouped into longer units. The verse is divided into two, or occasionally three, parts. Meter does not depend on the number of syllables in a foot or verse as in English, but only upon the number of stressed syllables in the line. Common forms of meter involve three beats, or stressed syllables, in the first part of the line and three in the latter part, or three in the first and two in the last, or two and two. A few other forms sometimes are recognizable. Stanzas or strophes in Hebrew poetry are accomplished by combining lines into

couplets or triplets; occasionally some longer combinations appear. Hebrew poetry may be translated into English with grace and beauty, but its full force and effectiveness come out best in the original language. The moving appeal of the great passages of Hebrew poetry, however, will not fail to grip you.

There is, moreover, one characteristic of Hebrew poetry that you can recognize with ease, namely, parallelism. This means that the sense of the first half of a verse is echoed in the last part. There are various kinds of parallelism, but the most common are these: the second part of the verse repeats in different words what the first part says; the second part makes a contrast with the first; the second part builds a further thought on the basis of the first. A few illustrations may help you to recognize some kinds of parallelism. Here is an example in which the second part repeats the first (Ps. 15: 1):

"Who shall abide in thy tabernacle?  
Who shall dwell in thy holy hill?"

For the psalmist, abiding in the Tabernacle was the same as dwelling in the holy hill. He simply lent emphasis and beauty to his expression through parallelism. Another example of the same type may be seen in Ps. 34: 1:

"I will bless the Lord at all times:  
His praise shall continually be in my mouth."

The parallelism of contrast is found often in The Proverbs. In it the second part makes a statement which is, so to speak, the other side of the truth in the first. Here is a good example (Prov. 15: 1):

"A soft answer turneth away wrath:  
But grievous words stir up anger."

Also easy to see is the "as . . . so" combination often

found in The Proverbs, which illustrates how the second part of the verse may be built on the thought of the first.

"As the door turneth upon his hinges,  
So doth the slothful upon his bed" (Prov. 26:14).

Sometimes the parallelism takes more complex forms than these, but in all its forms it creates a poetic beauty that can be felt even when the poems are translated into modern languages.

#### WISDOM LITERATURE

The Book of Job is not only a poetic work, but one that belongs to the type of writing known as "wisdom literature." "Wisdom" was a type of writing and teaching found among the Egyptians, Babylonians, and other peoples, as well as the Jews. The wise men took a place beside the priests in the teaching of ethics and religion to the common people, particularly to youth. The wisdom literature deals principally with the practical problems of men living in relationship to one another and to God. The wise men do not always rise to the lofty heights of faith and enthusiasm characteristic of the greatest prophets, but they do stand in the tradition of the prophets in that they speak to men in the situation in which they find themselves, and base their wisdom upon a knowledge of God. You will note that the wise men do not address their teachings specifically to the Jewish people, but they speak concerning problems that men everywhere have to face in their conduct and in their thinking. The wisdom books found in the Bible are Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. Job and Proverbs are almost altogether poetry, but Ecclesiastes is in large part prose. Two well-known wisdom books not included in the Hebrew Bible are Ecclesiasticus and The Wisdom of Solomon.

As you read the wisdom books you will begin to under-

stand why they have filled such an important place in the lives of people through the centuries. These significant books raise some of the fundamental questions of life and seek answers to them. Job speaks to the question, Why do the righteous suffer? Proverbs deals with the question, What shall a man do to get along well in life? Ecclesiastes asks, Is there any meaning in life after all?

#### THE BOOK OF JOB

How can a man have faith in God when disasters have utterly crushed him and he feels that God has deserted him? This question has torn the souls of men through all the ages. The Book of Job speaks for these sufferers and boldly lays their question before God himself.

The book is not written like a book of philosophy or theology. It is written as a play. Who wrote it and when it was written are not known. The writer took an old well-known story and used it as the framework for his play. The dramatic form of the book may be recognized easily from the following outlines of five scenes that are to be found in the first two chapters of Job.

##### *Scene I*

The first character to be introduced is a man named Job, a good man who revered God and loved his family. He is also a rich man, reckoning his wealth in flocks of sheep and herds of cattle. Moreover, he is that rare type of good man who prays in behalf of others. He offers sacrifices for his sons and daughters, in case they may have "cursed God in their hearts."

##### *Scene II*

Now the scene shifts to the courts of heaven, where God is receiving reports from the angels that patrol his vast

domains. Among these, astonishing as it may seem, is Satan. He is not the medieval demon with horns and tail, smelling of brimstone; rather, he is a smooth, sophisticated spirit, quite at home anywhere, not abashed even in the presence of God. The Lord finds out that Satan has been touring the earth and so inquires: "Hast thou seen my servant Job? A perfect and an upright man!" \* God takes pride in this man, holding him up as an example of what a human being ought to be.

But Satan is not impressed. "Yes, yes, Job is good, but of course he is well paid for it," Satan says. Look what God has done for him! He has a wonderful family and more wealth than he can possibly use. Satan gets permission from God to test Job's sincerity and predicts that Job will fail to measure up to God's expectations.

"Very well," God says to Satan, "do what you like with Job. Lay no hand on the man himself, but do what you please with everything he possesses. Then we shall see." \*

### *Scene III*

Satan goes back to earth to do his worst. In a series of terrible disasters, one close on the heels of another, everything Job has is destroyed. His stock, herd by herd, is stolen or struck by lightning. Just as the last messenger has brought the word telling Job that all is lost, another rushes in to tell of a whirlwind that has killed Job's ten children in one blast.

Yet Job does not complain, but cries, "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

### *Scene IV*

When next the heavenly hosts appear before the mighty throne, Satan is there again. God reminds him once more

of Job. The man is truly faithful; his character has survived the test.

But Satan has an explanation ready. God did not let him go quite far enough last time. Job has his health; he can have another family, he can gain another fortune. "Let me make his life miserable," Satan asks. "Let me bring him to the point where he will pray for death. Then indeed he will curse you to your face!" \* God gives him permission. "He is in your hands; only spare his life."

#### *Scene V*

As the final scene opens, Job sits disconsolate on an ash heap, scraping his skin with a piece of broken pottery. He is covered with boils from head to foot. He can neither sit nor stand nor lie without pain. His wife comes to him and, in despair, cries out, "Curse God, and die." But Job answers her without a trace of bitterness: "Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?"

These first dramatic scenes in *The Book of Job* were written in a time when, just as today, the accusation was being made that religion and morality are merely a glorified form of self-interest, that a man is God-fearing or good for the sake of what he gets out of it. The author was aware that a true faith and obedience to God can command the respect of men only when it has in it a certain heedlessness of advantage; that unless a man is committed to God unconditionally, so that he remains his servant even when every advantage has been removed, he does not really believe in God at all. These pages, therefore, should uncover for you something of the deepest nature of a true faith in God. Before your very eyes stands a man whose confidence in God remained unshaken when his whole world crashed around him and he was left with no prospect except poverty and suffering.

The main body of The Book of Job, from ch. 3 on, although it cannot be outlined into brief scenes, does preserve the dramatic form, presenting a series of dialogues in which Job boldly asks why God has laid such fearful suffering upon him. Certain friends have gathered about him, and they confidently attempt to explain to him the meaning of his hard experiences. Their principal arguments are that Job's suffering must result either from God's sending disaster to discipline him or as a punishment for his wickedness. But Job cannot accept these explanations. His deepest pain is not his outward disaster or the sickness of his body, but rather his inner distress at the fact that God seems to have turned against him and deserted him. The things that have happened seem to him to be an indication that he no longer enjoys God's favor. If God is just and cares for those who trust in him, then why has he permitted such things to happen to Job? Yet never does Job ask this as though he were on the point of flinging away his faith in God. No matter what God does to him, no matter how hard it is for him to understand God's ways with him, his soul remains bound in loyalty to God with ties that nothing can sever. "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him" (ch. 13: 15).

Through the ages Job has been a source of great comfort to thousands who have been oppressed by the mystery of their own suffering. Here they find no easy words that play around the surface of the problem. The friends of Job who have simple, ready-made, pious answers are plainly no true spokesmen for God. The moralist who thinks he can explain all happenings in the world on the basis that the righteous prosper while sinners suffer is repudiated, just as he was, even more decisively, by Jesus (Luke 13: 1-5). It is recognized that there is a mystery in suffering that no one can completely explain. But it is made plain that it is not a sign of lack of faith for a man under the pressure of his

misfortunes to carry up before God himself his agonies of questioning and doubt. The man of faith can be bold like Job, and like Jeremiah (Jer. 12: 1-6), to ask the questions of his soul with utter honesty.

The Book of Job gives no final explanation of the reason for human suffering. At the climax of the dialogue Job does not receive an answer to his questions, but the agony of his soul finds its rest in deeper faith in God. Through a great vision of the Lord his whole soul is humbled before the greatness and wisdom and power of God (chs. 38 to 41). With such a God, Job is content to leave his questions unanswered. His deepest need is satisfied when he knows that God has neither failed him nor cast him aside. As the book closes, Job has recovered not only his health but his fortunes as well.

**HOW TO READ JOB.** Read Job, if you possibly can, from a Bible that makes clear the dialogues and the poetic form of the book. Read the prologue contained in chs. 1 and 2 at one sitting.

There are some passages of particular beauty and power that may be treasured for their own sake, aside from their connection with the argument. One such is Job's first lament (ch. 3); another is the poem in praise of wisdom (ch. 28); descriptions of God (chs. 12: 13-25; 26); and the voice out of the whirlwind (chs. 38 to 42).

## psalms : proverbs

### THE WORLD'S GREATEST HYMNBOOK

**T**HE book of Psalms was the hymnbook of the second Temple. It was the hymnal out of which Jesus sang, as boy and man. It was from these psalms that Jesus and his friends sang on the night of his betrayal; it was a line from one of these (Ps. 22: 1) that rose to his lips in his hour of deepest agony. The Psalms formed the main hymnbook for the Early Christian Church. New hymns have been written as the centuries have passed, but the finest of them owe a debt to the psalmists. Great changes have taken place in the worship of the Church. But still today, the Church goes back to the psalms for help in leading men into the presence of God.

As a hymnal, the Psalter resembles your church hymnal in many ways. In the first place, the psalms are like the hymns in your hymnal in their variety of authorship and date. Many persons are needed to write a hymnal; a one-man hymnbook would not be a very good one. The psalms were written by many people; no one knows definitely how many writers are represented. So also most of the psalms are anonymous. In the Bible there are notes at the beginning of particular psalms, saying that David, or Moses, or Asaph, or someone else wrote them; but now it is generally recognized that these notes were later additions to the psalms.

Even as hymns come from many persons, so also they come

from many different periods. This is also true of the Old Testament psalms. Some of them come from early times in Israelite history and some of them may not have been written until about 200 years before the time of Christ. Just as you cannot usually be sure about the date of a hymn by reading it, so the dates of the psalms generally cannot be determined.

In a hymnal, you may sometimes find two versions of the same hymn. In *The Psalms* too we occasionally find duplicates, such as Ps. 14 and 53. If you will look at Ps. 108, you will find that it is made up of sections copied from Ps. 57: 5-11 and Ps. 60: 6-12. This is because the *Psalter*, as it now exists, was compiled from smaller hymn collections used in earlier times.

Also in a hymnal you will find different types of hymns; for example, there are some which were never intended by the author for use in church, but rather as personal expressions of personal feelings. "Abide with Me" is an example of such a hymn. Psalm 23 is a personal hymn in the *Psalter*; so is Ps. 42. Here you find yourself almost breaking in on the privacy of a soul at prayer. Yet this individual's prayer is so like what others feel, and so beautiful in its expression, that a whole church may adopt it and use it in worship.

Another type of hymn is national, such as "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," or "God Save the King." The *Psalter* has many patriotic hymns in it, such as Ps. 106 and Ps. 122. Some of them, such as Ps. 78, are as much like historical poems as they are like hymns.

Yet another type of hymn is liturgical, that is to say, it is written especially for use in a church service, and indeed may be written for a particular kind of service or a particular point in it. For instance, "Holy, Holy, Holy!" was intended as a morning worship hymn by a whole congregation. "Saviour, Breathe an Evening Blessing" is a liturgical hymn,

specifically written for use in an evening service. "Bread of the World in Mercy Broken" was written as a Communion hymn. In the same way, you can identify liturgical hymns in the Psalter. Psalms 120 to 134 were collected for singing by the pilgrims marching up to Jerusalem's Temple, and Ps. 134 is a short hymn for the night attendants in the Temple. Psalm 45 is a hymn for a royal wedding day. Psalm 150 is a hymn intended to be used in the Temple to the accompaniment of the full orchestra. You will be able to find others if you look.

#### BEAUTY AND TRUTH

The psalms are a striking example of how beauty can be used in the service of God. Not only is the language of the Psalter extremely beautiful, but the psalmists were keenly alive to the beauty of the world around them. Psalm 104 describes the activity of the living God in all nature; Ps. 107, a storm at sea; Ps. 29, the voice of God in a thunderstorm on the Lebanon mountains. Psalm 148 expresses the whole creation's praise of God. Thus the psalms say to you: The God who created so beautiful a world, the God who inspires in men's souls the love of beauty and the gift of creating beauty, can best be worshiped in ways that are themselves beautiful. The Psalter is a lasting warning against cheap hymns, careless prayers, and unkept places of worship.

#### THE MIRROR OF MAN

John Calvin called the psalms the "mirror of man." In the prophetic books you hear again and again the words, "Thus saith the Lord"; in the psalms you hear the voice of man, man reaching out to God. Yet Christians believe—as the Israelites believed—that man does not reach out to God unless God himself inspires him with that upreaching desire.

What you have in the Psalter is a many-colored record

of the inner lives and thoughts of many different sorts of men, all of them men of faith. Sometimes their faith faltered, as in Ps. 42, but their darkness had always in it some ray of hope. Sometimes they questioned God and his ways, but always they believed that God was in the shadows keeping watch over his own.

Nevertheless, they were men of their time and place. Sometimes they identified God's interests with those of the nation of Israel, or thought of Jerusalem as God's only true home. They hated their enemies and cried out for vengeance against them, as in Ps. 68: 22-28; 71: 13; 137: 8, 9. A Christian, whose thinking and attitudes are like those of Jesus Christ, cannot use as his own any thoughts of hatred and pride, even if he finds them in the Psalter.

#### THESE MEN KNEW GOD

The book of The Psalms takes you into the fellowship of men who, though they lived thousands of years ago and their names are forever lost from sight, nevertheless lead you step by step into the presence of the living God. They do not argue about God; they do not try to prove that he exists. To them God is more real than their own souls. They do not make general statements about God; rather, they bear personal witness to what they know of him, and in spite of the centuries their words have still the warmth with which they came forth from the soul that shaped them. They know who God is and what he can mean to human beings who have to live in a world of uncertainties, enmities, entanglements, and fears. They know what God expects of men as well as what he offers to them. But above all they have an understanding of how difficult it is to remain in fellowship with God when all the pressures of life combine to drive the soul away from God. As you read, you become confident that these are men who have gone ahead of you on the path that

leads into the secret place of God and that they have left marks along the way that you may follow.

It is no obstacle to your use of the psalms that you do not know the names of the men who wrote them. What matters is that out of the unseen come voices of men to speak to you of what God has been to them. It makes no difference whether it was David or Jeremiah or some completely unknown person who wrote the Fifty-first Psalm; it is sufficient for you that as he confesses his sins he leads you to the place where pardon and cleansing are to be found.

The psalmists often had times when they felt as though God were far away from them and the soul within them was dry and lifeless, times when they knew the hunger and thirst for God's presence rather than his actual presence (Ps. 42: 1). They were not ashamed to admit the fears with which they had been tortured or the sins which had shut them out from God. Often they spoke out of situations in which they were experiencing great distress because of their enemies. Sometimes their faith was triumphantly exultant (Ps. 136), but there were other times when their cry was one almost of despair (Ps. 137). But whatever their experience or their need, they brought it boldly before God.

As you read The Psalms you may find yourself saying:

"God is concerned with everything in my life. There is no escape from him. I may close my doors against him, but he has his own doors through which he can come into my life when he pleases. When I try to hide sin, or when I refuse to acknowledge it as sin and repent of it, I find that within my own soul walls have gone up that were not there before —walls which in shutting me in with my sin also shut me out from God. I discover God as the Giver of the good things of life which I have taken for granted. I discover him at last as the living Person on whom my own life depends, offering me fellowship with himself.

"Following the experiences of these men who knew God, instead of puzzling about what I think of God, I find that the main question is: What does God think of me? I am no longer the center of my own life, with faith in God as one of the details; rather, God is the Center, and my life has meaning only as I find him."

#### FINAL EDITION

The Psalms, as we have them, are a final edition of various collections of psalms that had been in use before. As we have it today, the Psalter consists of five smaller collections or books: I, Ps. 1 to 41; II, Ps. 42 to 72; III, Ps. 73 to 89; IV, Ps. 90 to 106; V, Ps. 107 to 150. At the end of each of these there is a brief doxology, expressing praise to the Lord. The last book ends with a more elaborate doxology, the whole of the last psalm, a fitting conclusion to the entire Psalter.

**HOW TO READ THE PSALMS.** You can read The Psalms straight through in order; but you probably will not want to read them all at one time. You will find it a most rewarding experience to memorize some of them, as you perhaps have learned already. Especially suitable for memorizing are: Ps. 1; 8; 15; 16; 19; 23; 27; 37; 42; 46; 51; 67; 90; 91; 93; 97; 100; 103; 119 (any sections); 124; 131; 139; 147; 148.

#### THE PROVERBS

In Jer. 18: 18, three classes of men are named from whom Israelites were to receive guidance in the affairs of life: priests, prophets, and wise men. The priests, besides performing their other duties, interpreted the law of God to the people; and the large collections of moral and spiritual laws in the early books of the Bible are for the most part the result of their labors. The prophets went beyond formal laws and spoke to the people of God's will for them in the actual

situations of life. Their teachings are preserved both in the books of the prophets and in the historical books. They also had an influence in shaping the various statements of God's law.

The wise men, however, were teachers, whose concern was largely, though not entirely, with young men, and who gave their main attention to questions of personal conduct. They put their instruction very often in short, pithy sayings called "proverbs," which could easily be committed to memory, and so would come to mind when any question of conduct arose. These proverbs may not have originated with the "wise men." Some of them show evidence of coming out of the mind of the people, just as proverbs do all over the world. Who first said, "Birds of a feather flock together"? Who said, "Haste makes waste"? No one knows, and it does not matter, for you recognize the proverbs as containing truth. You can memorize them without any trouble, and they become a part of your mental store. So it was with the ancient sayings. It would be interesting to know who first said, "Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred therewith" (Prov. 15: 17). Did some hard-pressed mother say it to her tableful of children? No one will ever know. Very likely it was quoted at many a dinner in Palestine, and it is as true today as it was the first day it was spoken.

#### THE PROVERBS OF SOLOMON

The name of Solomon, which is popularly attached to the main title as well as to several of the smaller sections of the collection, is not to be understood as indicating that he was the author of all the proverbs. According to I Kings, Solomon was the author of proverbs and songs (I Kings 4: 32). With the passing of centuries, King Solomon came to be regarded as the patron of all proverbs, and his great name was

placed at the head of more than one collection of them. No one knows how many of these may actually have come from him. The language of some of them contains late Hebrew forms which were not in use in his time. The individual proverbs no doubt come from many wise men. They were passed down and gradually grew in number with each generation. The actual authors were forgotten and only the point of their instruction was remembered.

#### THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM

Proverbs is one of the major examples of wisdom literature in the Old Testament. In it wisdom is the principal thing. Young men are encouraged to make the gaining of wisdom their chief aim in life.

God is the Giver of true wisdom. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" \* (Prov. 1: 7), and the irreligious man is foolish. This does not mean that anyone who wants to be wise has merely to pray for wisdom and it will be showered on him from heaven. Wisdom comes only to a man who faces life's decisions in earnest and wrestles with the perplexing questions of human conduct. But wisdom never comes to a man who has no reverence for God. The letter of James in the New Testament is quite in the spirit of the wisdom literature when it says:

"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God . . . Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good life let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. . . . The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity" (James 1:5; 3:13, 17).

According to the writers of The Proverbs, while the final source of wisdom is God himself, he makes it possible for you to learn in the simplest ways. It is not necessary to have a college education to be wise; in fact, no college in the world

can guarantee to make its students wise. Yet wisdom is constantly within the reach of everyone.

"Go to the ant, thou sluggard;  
Consider her ways, and be wise" (Prov. 6:6).

The ant, the wise man tells us, shows more wisdom than most men do about some things. Learn a lesson from the tiny creature. Or the reader is invited to consider the eagle, or the lizard, or the spider. Again wisdom can be learned just from watching how people act. The kind of truth that interests the wise men of Proverbs is often the result just of keeping your eyes open. Thus the proverbs are full of the most homely and everyday observations.

"As vinegar to the teeth, and as smoke to the eyes,  
So is the sluggard to them that send him"  
(Prov. 10:26).

In other words, a lazy man is anything but popular with his employers. Perfectly obvious, you say, but a great many people seem not to have discovered it!

"As a jewel of gold in a swine's snout,  
So is a fair woman which is without discretion"  
(ch. 11:22).

In other words, beauty without brains is out of place. But how many pretty girls do not know this!

"Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging:  
And whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise"  
(ch. 20:1).

The proverb writer must have heard young men of his time saying, "Another drink won't do me any harm—I can take it or leave it." You do not need a prophet to tell you that liquor will fool you; just look around and see the foolish ones who have been deceived.

Another feature of wisdom as it appears in The Proverbs is that often it is represented as a person rather than as a

thing. One of the most beautiful passages in the entire Bible is in ch. 8, where wisdom introduces herself as God's first companion:

"Before the mountains were settled,  
Before the hills was I brought forth:  
While as yet he had not made the earth, nor the  
fields,  
Nor the highest part of the dust of the world.  
When he prepared the heavens, I was there"  
(vs. 25-27).

"Then I was by him, as one brought up with him:  
And I was daily his delight" (v. 30).

There is an important point here that must not be missed. Wisdom is not a "thing," for things can be bought and sold, they can be carried around, they can be locked up. Wisdom is personal. There is no such thing as wisdom by itself; it exists only in people who are wise. And if you grow to be wise yourself, your wisdom will not be something that you can lay down like a cane or take off like a hat; your wisdom will be you; it will have to do with your whole mind and habits and with all your aims and actions.

#### MAIN THEMES

As you read The Proverbs you will become aware of certain main themes which keep recurring. Gradually there should build up in your mind a fairly clear picture of the kind of people the Israelite teachers hoped that their pupils would become. It is not surprising that they laid great weight upon teachableness. It was clear to them that no man can hope to escape from the faults that poison his life, if his personal pride keeps him from profiting by both the criticisms of his friends and the rebukes of his enemies. Moreover, in contrast to some modern popular teachers, who advise flattery and the suppression of all criticism in order to

win friends, these wise men held that the best service a friend can render is intelligent and helpful criticism. A person who is so egotistic that he is unteachable is unworthy of your companionship. Closely connected with teachableness is humility, a quality that is important also in the maintaining of harmony within the home.

The Proverbs touch often on matters connected with the home. They do not reflect the earlier conditions in Israel, when many men had more than one wife, but the later times when monogamy was more common. Under this later order the temptation to unfaithfulness became much greater, and a good teacher was concerned that the young men under his care should be warned of the perils of licentious living. The happiness and security of their family life was at stake.

Industry and thrift, honesty and temperance were virtues that needed constant emphasis, and it was not hard to show young men that the practice of these virtues would have substantial rewards. One of the weaknesses of The Proverbs is an overemphasis upon the rewards of virtue. Much is said of the honors and wealth and long life that the righteous should expect, but there is no warning, such as we find elsewhere in the Scriptures, that the righteous man in faithfulness to God may have to endure the loss of everything.

Self-discipline is a constant theme; a man without self-control is likened to a city that has no protecting walls (ch. 25: 28). Restraint in speech, guarding against the word that, once spoken, can never be recalled, is counseled over and over. So also the control of anger is emphasized. The man who fails in this is regarded as a fool who is likely to destroy both himself and others.

There is, furthermore, a note of gentleness and charity that comes out of the very heart of Israel's religion. A care for the poor in Israel was rooted in the conviction that every Israelite, rich and poor alike, was precious in the sight

of God. In one passage (ch. 25: 21) this compassion is extended even to enemies:

"If thine enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat;  
And if he be thirsty, give him water to drink."

There are many places in The Proverbs where you may become conscious of the difference between the days in which they were written and the present day. In ch. 1: 10-19 young men are warned not to let themselves be drawn into bands of reckless robbers who lie in wait for unwary travelers and take everything they have. The Bedouins of the nearby desert regions counted it gay and profitable sport to indulge in such practices, and did not much care if the traveler lost his life. Boys, hearing of such exploits, might easily be led by the spirit of adventure into trying it themselves. In ch. 31: 10-31, the activities of the virtuous woman are very different from those of most modern women. There she is farmer, manufacturer, business manager, social service director, wife, and mother, all at one and the same time. Her husband spends his time in the service of the community. He has been set free from the management of his estate by his wife's competence and industry, and he sits in counsel with his fellow elders in their usual meeting place at the city gate. With the passing of the years customs have changed, but the virtues that make a woman, or a man, worthy of honor remain the same.

**HOW TO READ THE PROVERBS.** In all, seven collections of proverbs have been combined to form our book. These begin at chs. 1: 1; 10: 1; 22: 17; 25: 1; 30: 1; 31: 1; and 31: 10. Scholars think the part beginning at ch. 10: 1 is the oldest, and that the first nine chapters make up the latest section.

In your reading you may consider this book in three sections:

1. An ode in praise of wisdom: chs. 1 to 9.
2. Miscellaneous proverbs about men and things: chs. 10 to 29.

3. A collection of wisdom poems: chs. 30; 31.

The first part should be read straight through, when you have time to read it at one sitting. The last section, including ch. 30, entitled "The Words of Agur," and ch. 31, entitled "The Words of King Lemuel," may be read in the same way. But the middle part, the greater part of the book, can be read in almost any order, because there is usually little connection from verse to verse. Each one is a proverb by itself, complete and independent, like a pearl on a string. Consequently one good way to read *The Proverbs*, which cannot be recommended for most books, is to open the book at random, run your eyes down the page until you find a striking and helpful sentence, and stop right there. Learn that sentence by heart. Practice saying it to yourself. Of all the parts of the Bible, this is one of the most suitable for memorizing.

## ecclesiastes the song of songs

No book in the Bible is more puzzling than the book of Ecclesiastes. The author seems to be bitter and disappointed with life. "Vanity of vanities," he says; "all is vanity." What does it mean that here in the very middle of the Bible you come upon a man whose words have such a pessimistic sound?

Do not be too quick, however, to dismiss this book as sheer pessimism. The problem reaches beyond Ecclesiastes. The Bible as a whole has been criticized at times as hopelessly pessimistic in regarding man as a sinner who can never attain his true life unless he is redeemed. The prophet, with his proclamation of God's judgment, has seemed to many to have put a needlessly dark interpretation upon events. On the other hand, the Bible has set before man a vision of what his life can be, and what his world can become, which has often drawn the criticism that it is unrealistically optimistic. In short, the Bible is at one and the same time too pessimistic and too optimistic for the thinking of most people in the world. The fact is that the Bible has its own way of thinking about life.

It will help in understanding Ecclesiastes if at the very beginning you get clearly in mind the author's unswerving faith in God. Never at any point in his book is there the slightest sign of doubt or irreverence toward God. For him God is the absolute sovereign over all things. The events of life are in God's hand, and man's only good is in obedience

to him. What he questions is not God, but rather the whole world of human endeavor included in the phrase "all things . . . under the sun." The acids of his skepticism are sharp as he turns them first upon one activity of man and then upon another, questioning the value of the things upon which men set their hearts.

#### WORK, WEALTH, PLEASURE, AND POWER

One thing that seems to make life worth-while is work. But Ecclesiastes at once has a question to ask:

"What profit hath a man of all his labor  
Which he taketh under the sun?" (ch. 1:3).

Human society is like an anthill. There is much hurrying and scurrying, but when the ants are all dead the world is no better for it. Human work is never properly paid. There is no appreciation of it; it cannot endure.

"I looked on all the labor that I had labored to do; and, behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was no profit under the sun" \* (ch. 2:11).

But work brings wealth. What does the writer of Ecclesiastes think of this?

"He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase" (ch. 5:10).

You think you will be happy when you have a thousand dollars, but when you have it, you see that you need two thousand. When you have that much, it appears that nothing less than five thousand will do.

What about pleasure? He has tried it—without success.

"I made me great works; I builded me houses; . . . I made me gardens and orchards, . . . pools of water, . . . silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of . . . the provinces: . . . men singers and women singers, . . . musical instruments, . . . of all sorts" (ch. 2: 4-8).

No doubt he was envied far and wide. But his own sad verdict was:

"I said of laughter, It is mad: and of mirth, What doeth it? . . . All was vanity and a striving after wind" \* (ch. 2:2, 17).

Some people think that power is the goal of life. But Ecclesiastes knew also the emptiness of that. Where are the great men of the past? A moldering headstone, a name in a schoolboy's textbook, a face on a postage stamp!

In other human beings he finds little to admire. "A man among a thousand I have found," he admits, "but a woman among all those I have not found" (ch. 7: 28).

Learning is an endless task; for every question that is answered, a thousand new ones arise in its place. "Much study is a weariness of the flesh."

"In much wisdom is much grief:  
And he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow"  
(ch. 1: 18).

Furthermore, he doubts whether we can really know very much after all.

"Wisdom remained out of reach" \* (ch. 7: 23).

#### SKEPTICISM, BIBLICAL AND MODERN

Compare this, however, with the skepticism that is so common in the modern world and mark the difference. The modern skeptic usually begins by dismissing God from the universe. He deals more gently with man, regarding him as a creature with sufficient wisdom to live a reasonably decent life even in a meaningless and frustrating world. But he sees the life of man surrounded on every side by impenetrable darkness.

The modern skeptic is confident of man's wisdom, but despairing of God. The author of Ecclesiastes is confident of God's wisdom, but despairing of man. He turns his search-

light upon the common activities of man in order to expose the emptiness and purposelessness of much that makes up his life. It is wrong, however, to assume that he pronounces all life to be not worth living. On the contrary, he tells us that if a man is content to take the simple joys which God gives him and will work with all his might at the task his hand finds to do, he need not find life empty. In a world so tangled and disordered that no human mind can see the order and purpose of it all, a man, nevertheless, can remain confident that God is sovereign over it all and can give himself in obedience to the will of God.

#### A DISCOURAGED PHILOSOPHER

The author of this book grew up in Palestine in a time when the Greeks ruled the land, and many of the Jewish young people were finding Greek games, Greek art, and Greek philosophy fascinating. The aim of the Greek thinker was to know everything and understand everything. He wanted to unravel all the secrets of the universe and to fit everything together so that one could see clearly what it all meant. He was confident that the human mind was capable of doing this. Modern man's belief in the ability of science to solve all problems is directly parallel.

In ch. 1 of his book Ecclesiastes tells us that he embarked on this search for knowledge. He followed every path that opened before him. But the farther he went, the more discouraged he became. The world refused to fit into a neat system for him. Finally he came to the conclusion that, so far as man is concerned, the meaning and purpose of all things is past finding out. The experiences of life were completely contradictory. He trusted men and found his trust betrayed. He saw fools grow rich and act as though they were great men, while wise men had hardly a crust to eat. He saw friends struck down by death at the very moment when life seemed most precious to them. These were things

that he could not explain away. He was the kind of man who had to look realities in the face unflinchingly. That, perhaps, is one of his services to the believer. He exposes realities that most people are afraid to face because of the strain they place upon their faith. How can these things happen in a world in which God is sovereign? Ecclesiastes says that to his question he found no answer; there were many things in life that were beyond any human explanation.

It is important to recognize that for Ecclesiastes, as for most men in Old Testament times, there was nothing beyond the grave except a shadowy life in Sheol. Some of the prophets dreamed of a day when God would create a new paradise on earth and bring back the righteous from the dead to share in it. But that seemed a dim and distant prospect. To such a writer as Ecclesiastes one of the limitations that had to be accepted by man was that the story of life was bounded by birth and death. If there was to be meaning or order in it, it had to be found within those bounds. There was for him no balance to be adjusted in a future life. This was not peculiarly the viewpoint of Ecclesiastes, but was shared by nearly all for whom he wrote. For the modern Christian reader, however, it gives to the book a note of unrelieved gloom.

#### ECCLESIASTES SPEAKS TO US

What, then, has Ecclesiastes to say to us? First, he warns us that all our human achievements have a question mark against them. He pricks the bubble of man's false confidence in his attainments, not only in knowledge, but in every realm of life. If Ecclesiastes were living today, he would undoubtedly have something to say about the widespread idea that through science man should be able to solve all his problems, including the problem of himself. Where the Greeks believed in salvation through knowledge, many modern men

believe in salvation through science. Ecclesiastes warns both that there are severe limitations upon what man's wisdom can do.

Secondly, he says to us that however dark and contradictory the picture of life may seem to us, from God's side of things there is order and meaning in it. God is this tangled world's Creator, and its life is wholly in his hand. It is true that "no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end," yet it is also true that "he hath made every thing beautiful in his time" (ch. 3: 11).

Thirdly, he counsels us to do the work that we find under our hand, putting our whole might into it, even though we know the outcome is uncertain. The man who always waits until he is sure of the weather will not sow his seed at all. Recognize the uncertainties, but do not let them paralyze you and keep you from decisive action.

Fourthly, he counsels simplicity. Do not expect too much of life. Take the gifts God sends to you and delight in them.

"Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; . . .  
Truly the light is sweet,  
And a pleasant thing . . . for the eyes to behold the  
sun: . . .  
Eat thy bread with joy, . . .  
Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest" (ch. 11:9,  
7; 9:7, 9).

These are not the words of a bitter spirit, disillusioned and soured with life, but rather of one who has faced squarely the limitations that seem to be placed upon his existence, and yet, in spite of them, has found a life for which he can thank God.

Together with this should be placed his words on sharing:

"Give a portion to seven, and also to eight;  
For thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth"  
(ch. 11: 2).

Life may be only a crust of bread. But a crust kept to oneself, the "morsel...alone" as Job called it, is a moldy crumb; a crust shared becomes a sacrament of friendship.

Finally he sums up his counsel to men in the words, "Fear God, and keep his commandments." Some persons have found it hard to understand how Ecclesiastes, after all that has gone before, could end upon this note. However, it is in keeping with the writer's whole viewpoint. In the midst of a dark and uncertain world, there is no hope for a man except to hold fast to his God.

**HOW TO READ ECCLESIASTES.** Begin your reading with ch. 5: 1-7, which gives you a sharp impression of the writer's reverence before God. Then read ch. 12, where he advises his readers to serve God while they are in the strength of their youth. With this as background, turn to chs. 1: 12 to 2: 26 and trace the different experiences which led this man to disillusionment with most human pursuits. In ch. 3: 1-15 you will find his conception of the order of life; and in vs. 16-22 of the same chapter, his lack of any hope of a life beyond the grave. With these points clear in your understanding of the book, you will find the remainder less difficult and confusing. However, do not expect any part of this book to fall into neat agreement with other parts of Scripture. Let it fulfill its unique function in its own way.

#### THE SONG OF SONGS

Here is another book that seems at first sight out of place among the more "dignified" books of the Bible. Between the disturbing words of Ecclesiastes and the sublime eloquence of the Prophet Isaiah we come upon a group of love songs. Where is the Law? Where are the Prophets? Where are The Psalms or The Proverbs? They are nowhere in sight. This book is about springtime and love. Why, then, was it admitted to the Bible?

## WHY IS THIS BOOK IN THE BIBLE?

The book of poems before us is from the only world some young people know, the only world worth knowing, as it seems to anyone in love—the world of springtime and love in bloom. The name of God is mentioned only once, and on that occasion as casually as we might use the word “god-forsaken,” without any religious intention.

The theme of The Song of Songs is, of course, love—not love in general, but the love of a man and a woman. The central thought is expressed in ch. 8: 7, although it is really in every line:

“Many waters cannot quench love,  
Neither can the floods drown it:  
If a man would give all the substance of his  
    house for love,  
It would utterly be contemned.”

These ideas are woven all through the book, in interlacing lines of glowing poetry. An essay would not do; a sermon or a law would not have the same effect. Some ideas can better be expressed by poets than by preachers, and this is one of them.

## THEORIES AS TO THE FORM OF THE BOOK

Just what the form of this poetic book is, remains somewhat in doubt. There are two principal theories about it. One is that this book is what nowadays we would call an anthology, a collection of poems connected only by the fact they are all on the same theme, love between man and woman.

The other theory about the book is that it is a dramatic poem, a play in verse, but with the characters not indicated, so that the reader must decide who is speaking. There are two forms of the dramatic theory. One is that we have here a two-character play, with a chorus, the “daughters of Jeru-

salem," whose voices we hear, for instance, in ch. 6: 1. This theory is followed in the American Revised Version, where the different sections of the poem are assigned to the principal characters—the bride and groom.

There is another form of the dramatic theory, suggesting that there are three characters in addition to the chorus. In this arrangement, the two main characters are a country girl, the "Shulammite," and a young man from the same neighborhood. They meet, they fall in love, and their love blooms with the fragrance of all the hillside flowers. Then comes the villain of the piece, none other than King Solomon. His harem was immense, and he was always on the lookout for girls to add to it. He had unlimited wealth, and his royal guardsmen made an impressive display (ch. 3: 6-11). The effect of all this magnificence, together with the king's very skillful love-making (ch. 4), confuses the simple country girl, and for a time she forgets all about her peasant lover. But in time true love triumphs. Solomon has "threescore queens, and fourscore concubines, and virgins without number"; true love is not to be found in such a harem. "My dove, my undefiled is but one." True love is to be found when only two share it. So the girl goes back to her native hills, and the play closes with a chorus of joy on the "mountains of spices."

The main thought of the book is perfectly clear and its message is needed in the twentieth century. It cuts straight across the idea of "love" to which the modern age is accustomed. Many people think of love as something that comes and goes, appears and vanishes. The Song of Songs tells of love that is indestructible, immortal. Current novels and pictures would have us believe that you can share the true love between man and woman with any number of people. The Song of Songs has a different story: "I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine."

## HIDDEN MEANINGS?

Is there more in The Song of Songs than meets the eye? Many readers have thought so. That it is love poetry is perfectly clear. But can this love be meant as a symbol or allegory of something else? Was it the intention of the poet to describe, not love between man and woman, but some other kind of love? There is no clear indication that such was his intention, but for centuries various allegorical interpretations have been suggested. Jewish rabbis thought that the man in The Song of Songs represents God, and the woman, Israel; or that the man represents God, and the woman, the human soul. The early Christians, finding this book already in their Scripture, began at once to think of allegorical meanings. Some thought that the man represents Christ, and the woman, the Church. The obvious meaning, however, is so important and so beautiful that it is not at all necessary to seek other meanings.

**HOW TO READ THE SONG OF SONGS.** Read this book in a modern translation, preferably in the American Revised Version. Remember that you are reading poetry, not prose, and remember also that it is Oriental poetry. Note the fragrant odors that are suggested from beginning to end; wine (ch. 1: 2), ointment (perfume) (v. 3), rose and lily (ch. 2: 1), apples (v. 2), raisins (v. 5, A.R.V.), a whole gardenful of spices (ch. 4: 12-16). The figures of speech may seem strange to us but were perfectly natural when it was written. For instance, the young man says, "Thy hair is as a flock of goats." The picture in his mind is a bright sunny morning in the hills, with a flock of black-haired goats in a mountain pasture, the sun reflected from their gleaming hair. His dark-haired sweetheart, her long locks shining in the sun, reminds him of that sight.

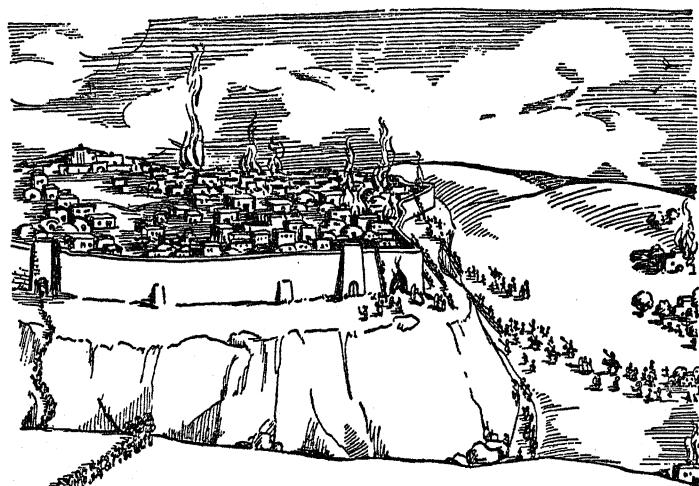
*P A R T F I V E*

**writings of the prophets**

*Called in the Hebrew Bible The Latter Prophets*

|          |         |           |
|----------|---------|-----------|
| Isaiah   | Amos    | Habakkuk  |
| Jeremiah | Obadiah | Zephaniah |
| Ezekiel  | Jonah   | Haggai    |
| Hosea    | Micah   | Zechariah |
| Joel     | Nahum   | Malachi   |

To which are added from The Writings:  
Lamentations, Daniel.



## the prophets

YOU WILL be able to read the books of the prophets more intelligently if you understand first what a prophet is. The prophets of the Bible are not chiefly predictors, as a common use of the word "prophet" suggests.

Their work did not consist mainly in telling people what was going to happen before it happened. Prophecy in the Old Testament is not history written, so to speak, in the future tense, so that a reader could take it and read it and know, without any doubt, exactly what the next day, year, or century would bring forth. The prophets were *spokesmen for God*. They were men who in some particular situation looked at that situation as God would look at it, and pronounced God's verdict on it. Their characteristic phrase is not, "I think," or, "It seems to me," but, "Thus saith the Lord." Sometimes this involved predictions; but more often it meant calling the people to repent of the things they were doing and to change their ways before their evil course ended in disaster. It meant interpreting to the people the events of the time so that God's purpose for them might be clear. Above all, it meant constantly proclaiming that only in faithfulness to their covenant with God could Israel find its true life.

### PROPHETS AND PREACHERS

The prophets were more like preachers than like any other class of persons today. The Christian preacher sets out

to interpret the will of God to men; and that is just what the prophet did.

Still, there are some striking differences between the Hebrew prophet and the Christian preacher. The preacher has a church; the prophet had none. The preacher usually is called to some particular congregation and is paid a regular salary. The prophets were not called by the people or by any group of people. On the contrary, most prophets found the people of their communities stubbornly against them. A prophet had no church organization to provide a living for him. Preachers are under ecclesiastical jurisdiction, that is, they act under the direction of a congregation, a presbytery, or a bishop. No prophet had any bishop over him or any presbytery of prophets to review his work. Preachers deliver their messages at stated times; you may even read in the paper as early as Friday the title of the minister's sermon for Sunday, with the hour of the service definitely announced. But the prophets did not announce in advance what they planned to say, and they did not maintain regular schedules of preaching.

A minister's sermons are nearly always set in the framework of public worship, the order of which has been carefully planned in advance. But the prophets' messages were rarely given in these surroundings; or when they were, they were interruptions rather than parts of the service.

#### THE PROPHET'S AUDIENCE

Another considerable difference between the prophets and the modern preacher is that the preacher has a ready-made audience, mostly of believers, who in fact have selected him as their preacher because he believes much as they do. The prophets, on the other hand, had no church and no definite congregation. If they wanted a crowd to hear them, they would go where the crowds were. They would go to the

Temple on a festival day, or stand in the market place, or at the city gate, and start talking. They knew how to catch the ear of a crowd and hold it.

But they did not always choose to speak to crowds. Sometimes they would secure a private interview with a king. Sometimes they would speak to a small, carefully selected group. Sometimes they would not say a word to anyone, but would write down what they had to say, and commit it to loyal friends to keep and pass on. Some students of the prophets have thought that if these men lived today some of them would not be preachers in the usual sense of the word, but would be columnists, commentators, and writers of magazine articles and books.

However they worked, you may be sure of two things about every prophet whose writings the Old Testament has preserved for us. One is that they were quite certain God had given them something important to say. The other is that they wanted by all means to be heard. You may think of the prophets as men with whom God had shared some of his secrets, and who did not wish to keep those secrets to themselves.

#### PROPHETS IN EARLIER TIMES

With but two exceptions, the last seventeen books of the Old Testament originated with men now called the "writing prophets." They were, however, by no means the first of the prophets. Of course you remember Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha. But they were only three lofty peaks in a long range. There had been prophets all through Israel's history. There were the men of prophetic mind who wrote and gathered and edited the stories of Israel's past, whose combined work was called "the former prophets." There were also individual prophets who had been God's spokesmen to their times. To go back no earlier than the time of the first kings,

there was Nathan, who spoke so boldly to David concerning his sin and was instrumental in seeing that Solomon, and not Adonijah, was placed on David's throne. There was Ahijah the Shilonite, who encouraged Jeroboam I to engineer his great secession. There was Shemaiah (I Kings 12: 24; II Chron. 12: 8), who warned Rehoboam on one occasion against raising an army and later commented on the invasion of Judah by Shishak. There was Jehu the son of Hanani (II Chron. 19: 1, 2), who condemned King Baasha and later rebuked King Jehoshaphat, and wrote the annals of Jehoshaphat's reign. There was an unnamed prophet, who rebuked Ahab for a certain foreign alliance (I Kings 20: 13, 22, 28, 35). There was Micaiah ben-Imlah (I Kings 22: 8 ff.), who predicted the disaster at Ramoth-gilead; Jahaziel (II Chron. 20: 14 ff.), who encouraged King Jehoshaphat in one of his wars; and Eliezer (II Chron. 20: 37), who condemned the same king for a naval alliance. There was the unnamed young prophet, Elisha's deputy (II Kings 9: 1), who anointed that fanatic army officer Jehu to be king of Israel; another whose name is not given, who rebuked King Amaziah for hiring an army (II Chron. 25: 7 ff.). These and others appear on the pages of Israel's history before the time of the writing prophets.

Two features stand out in all the prophets' work. First, they were constantly concerned with public affairs and were convinced that the nation's welfare depended upon God's will being done in the whole of its life. Religion for them was not a purely personal matter. The prophets would have been the last persons to suppose that religion and politics, religion and international affairs, religion and public life, religion and business, do not mix. The other point is this: They spoke mainly, not to those who would be likely to agree with them, but rather to those who needed most to hear what they had to say. If their subject was statecraft or foreign af-

fairs, they would talk to the men responsible, namely, to the kings and nobles. If they wished to challenge current business practices, they went into the markets and spoke directly to the merchants. In short, when the prophets knew that something needed to be done, they addressed themselves to the men who could do something about it.

**HOW TO READ THE PROPHETIC BOOKS.** Suggestions for reading each book will be given in the proper places. In general, it will be helpful for you to read the prophets, not in the order in which they appear in your English Bible, but in the order in which they actually lived and taught.

1. Eighth-century prophets (i.e., between 800 and 700 B.C.): Amos, Hosea, Isaiah (chs. 1 to 39), Micah.
2. Seventh and sixth century: Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Jeremiah, Ezekiel.
3. Late sixth and early fifth: Second Isaiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi.

There is as yet no well-established agreement among scholars about the dates of the following: Joel, Obadiah, and Jonah.

## ISAIAH AND the great unnamed prophet

**I**OU CAN better understand the messages of the prophets if you know something of the historical situations in which they lived and worked. The writing prophets cover a period of roughly three hundred years, and therefore their messages reflect the changes that took place during those centuries.

If there had been newspapers during the lifetime of Isaiah, the headlines would have had much to say about Assyria. The sinister shadow of that great military power was stretching farther and farther westward. What had once been only a harmless fishing village on the upper Tigris River, hundreds of miles away, had become the base of operations for the world's most powerful military machine. Assyria became in its time what Germany aspired to be in more recent times: a nation under arms, with a blueprint for world conquest. Many of Isaiah's prophecies were called forth by some political or military action on Assyria's part.

Down in the southwest, in the opposite direction from Palestine, there stretched along the Nile the ancient empire of Egypt. The memory of the splendor of Egypt as it used to be, and of its once powerful armies, had a great influence upon the Israelites. They were not more than two hundred miles from Egypt. They were three times as far from Nineveh, Assyria's capital. Egypt naturally loomed larger in their sight.

The great temptation for the little countries of Israel and Judah was to suppose that under the protection of Egypt they would be quite safe from invasion from the north. When the prophets urged their nation to trust in God, the people thought it quite enough to trust in Egypt. Isaiah tried to convince the people that Egypt was a dying giant, no longer strong. For the most part, his efforts were in vain.

#### GOD CALLS ISAIAH

Isaiah has given us a vivid word picture of how the call of God came to him (ch. 6). He was in the Temple at worship when it happened. The smoke was curling upward from the sacrifice on the altar. As Isaiah stood or knelt there, the scene changed before his eyes. The swirling smoke became the skirts of a vast sweeping robe, worn by an immense, lofty Being on a throne "high and lifted up." It was none other than the throne of the most high God. Around the throne were winged seraphim, one crying to another:

"Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts:  
The whole earth is full of his glory."

From that hour, Isaiah knew God as he is. He was Israel's King; but, more than that, he was King and Judge of the whole earth.

Isaiah in his vision came into the very presence of God. But it did not make him happy. On the contrary, he felt deeply ashamed. "Woe is me! for I am undone; . . . mine eyes have seen . . . the Lord of hosts." It was as if a covering had been torn from over his life and he could see himself for the first time as he really was—an unclean man, in the midst of an unclean people. In the presence of that towering throne everything looked different. He now saw that his nation contained dishonest leaders, stupid and irresponsible

priests, prophets who said only what pleased persons in authority, merchants whose only thought was of profit. And Isaiah knew that he and many others like him had been content to leave things as they were.

Isaiah's cry of despair was answered by one of the winged seraphim, who flew to him with a burning coal from the high altar. Touching Isaiah's lips with its white heat, the seraph cried:

"Lo, this hath touched thy lips;  
And thine iniquity is taken away,  
And thy sin purged."

Then Isaiah heard the voice of the Lord himself:

"Whom shall I send,  
And who will go for us?"

Isaiah was ready. With his whole heart he answered, "Here am I; send me."

From the start Isaiah had slight hopes of accomplishing very much. People would not listen to him, the nation would adopt ruinous policies, the country and the people he loved would go from bad to worse. Despite his conviction that all his efforts were not going to turn back the tides of evil, he persevered in them to the end. Most young ministers today go into their work with the hope of success; Isaiah went into his with the certainty of failure, in so far as his times were concerned. But prophets were like that. Their main question was never, "How many people will believe this?" but: "Is this true? Did God say this?"

#### SENSATIONAL PREACHER

Isaiah had no church to support him, no official position, no newspaper or magazine in which to write his articles, no college in which to teach. But he had a message from God

and a people that needed it. How was he to get their attention for what he had to say?

One of his methods was to give to his little boys names that summarized his warnings of doom. In Hebrew their names were Maher-shalal-hashbaz and Shearjashub. Those are not ordinary names. Maher-shalal-hashbaz means, "Spoil speedeth, prey hasteth," or, in other words, "It won't be long now before we are looted." It was one of Isaiah's constant themes that God would punish Israel and Judah by a foreign invasion. Every time Isaiah's wife would call the little boy, she would remind all the neighbors of the disaster to come. The other little boy, Shearjashub, had a name meaning, "A remnant will return," or, "A remnant will repent." Every time anyone pronounced that boy's name, he would be reminded of another of Isaiah's messages: that most of the people of Israel would be destroyed, but that some of them, a faithful remnant, would survive.

A more striking act of Isaiah's was to walk about "naked and barefoot" for three years (ch. 20). Possibly this is an exaggeration. But even if he was only stripped to near nakedness, it must have been a rather shocking way for a man to appear on the streets of the capital city, summer and winter, for three years. People would ask, "What in the world does this mean?" And if Isaiah had used modern language, he might have said: "It means just this, fellow citizens: This is the way the Egyptians are going to look when the Assyrians have finished with them—the Egyptians in whom you have such hopes. And what will you do then?"

Isaiah was not trying to be eccentric or grotesque, but he had to make sure that his words would be heard. Writing out his messages in a neat book and filing it in the state library was not Isaiah's way of doing things. He could not reach the "remnant of the faithful" unless he spoke to all. So Isaiah, whose odd behavior must have helped to gain an

audience, preached in all kinds of situations. He went into the market square when it was crowded and began to sing a song of a vineyard, a vineyard planted with the choicest vines that brought forth only wild grapes—the vine was Judah, the nation that had disappointed God. Isaiah preached in the Temple when the crowds were there. He went to meet the king in a quiet spot where he could talk with him face to face. He spoke to the nobles in the royal court, to the merchants in the bazaars. In prose and in poetry, his words kept sounding in the ears of the people, pressing upon them the claims of a holy God.

#### ISAIAH'S TRIUMPH

Isaiah had a great deal to say about the relation between Judah and other nations. Foreign policy was one of his most intense interests. He knew how tragedy could come to many through the stupidity or selfishness or carelessness of statesmen. With Ahaz, one of the worst kings Judah ever had, began the breakdown of the nation's independence. The Assyrians had invaded Israel and imposed a very large tribute. The end of Israel, the Northern Kingdom, was in sight. But still the people of Judah found it hard to believe that anything could hurt them.

Israel and its neighbor to the north, Syria, formed an alliance to get rid of the Assyrians. It was a foolish dream, and Ahaz of Judah would have none of it. So Israel and Syria combined their little armies and marched south with the intention of deposing Ahaz and putting a puppet named Tabeel in his place. This frightened everyone; Isaiah says, "Their hearts fluttered like leaves in the wind." \* But Isaiah told Ahaz to stand fast; by faith in God, his throne and nation would endure. If only he feared God more, he would fear his enemies less.

But Ahaz was headstrong. He did not understand faith,

only politics. He wanted the help of Assyria against his northern neighbors. So he sent to King Tiglath-pileser an immense amount of gold and silver that he had stripped from the Temple and the palace. What Ahaz could not see, Isaiah saw plainly: Ahaz had put his faith in gold and silver, not in God; he had let Judah become a vassal state of Assyria, and this was the beginning of his country's end.

In response to Ahaz' plea, Tiglath-pileser led his armies westward. He invaded the Northern Kingdom, decisively defeated the Israelites, and deported three and a half tribes—Reuben, Gad, Naphtali, and the eastern half of Manasseh. This left Israel a very weak nation; and when Damascus then fell to the conqueror, the way to the Mediterranean Sea was opened for the Assyrians.

A few years later the Assyrians attacked Israel again and laid siege to Samaria, the capital. After three years they breached the walls and captured the city (722-721 B.C.). The Assyrian host was now on the border of Judah. The people of Judah could see their danger and knew that Isaiah's warning was justified.

King Hezekiah, the son and successor of Ahaz, was a better king than his father. But he too kept up negotiations with Egypt, and tried to avoid paying the ruinous annual tribute to Assyria which had been imposed. Isaiah warned him against Egypt; but Hezekiah, like his father, put more trust in politics than in God, when it came to practical matters. Later on Hezekiah was drawn into an anti-Assyrian alliance with a perennial plotter from Babylon named Merodach-baladan. Isaiah warned him about this too, but in vain. Finally King Hezekiah broke off relations with Assyria and refused to send the usual tribute. The Assyrian king, Sennacherib, led his army into the Judean hills to punish this rebellion. They swept across the country, killing, robbing, and burning; and leaving a devastated land be-

hind them. Forty-six towns were destroyed—nearly all that little Judah had—and Jerusalem itself was surrounded. At last Hezekiah capitulated and paid a heavy tribute to the Assyrians.

In the crisis of the Assyrian siege, when all seemed lost, Isaiah showed his faith in a new way. He made the audacious prophecy that the army of Assyria would be turned away from the walls of Jerusalem. This prediction came true, and it might be supposed that Isaiah had triumphed at last. His most unlikely prediction had come true; yet in Jerusalem, instead of thankfulness to God for deliverance, there was only rioting and drunkenness. Here and there faithful souls recognized what God had done for his people. They were the "remnant," of whom Isaiah spoke so often, the hope for the future, the few who would keep alive the light of faith in a world of darkness and turmoil.

#### BEYOND THE YEARS

Isaiah expressed another hope. In common with other prophets, he looked forward to the coming of the Messianic King. The prophets did not use the word "Messiah," the Anointed One, in the sense of the redeemer of mankind who would establish God's Kingdom in fullness. For them, each of their kings was an anointed one, chosen of God to rule. Their sorrow was that so many of their kings were the very opposite of what God desired. But one day, the prophets knew, God would send to this world a better king. He would send a leader who would establish peace and justice among men.

Christians have long seen in these passages a prophecy of the coming of Christ; indeed "Christ" means Messiah, the Anointed. These "Messianic" prophecies are not to be taken as descriptions of Jesus Christ made before he was born. Rather, in them the souls of men were reaching out in

hope and longing for their redemption. There seemed to be no hope for man unless God himself would establish a new order of life in the midst of the world. Some of the notable passages in Isaiah about the ideal King can be found in chs. 9: 2-7; 11; 32: 1-8.

When these things shall be, Isaiah did not say. The prophets had no calendar of the future. For Isaiah, as for the other prophets, history does not go round and round in circles; it moves forward under the control of God.

So Isaiah could see beyond the little kings of Israel and the greater monarchs of the surrounding empires and beyond the destruction of his nation to a happier age when at last God would rule and men would obey. His contemporaries could not see this. They went on in their stubborn ways toward the catastrophe that the prophets had foretold. Was Isaiah, then, a failure? In the service of God there is neither success nor failure, but only a choice between faithfulness and unfaithfulness.

**HOW TO READ ISAIAH.** The following passages are of special interest:

Isaiah's call: ch. 6: 1-8.

Keynote chapter, combining several of Isaiah's messages, against the background of the Assyrian invasion and the country's destruction: ch. 1.

On universal peace: ch. 2: 1-4.

On the terrible day of the Lord: ch. 2: 5-22.

On the coming ruin: ch. 3: 1-15.

On the extravagance of women: ch. 3: 16-24.

On social injustice: ch. 5: 1-24.

The ideal King to come: chs. 9: 2-7; 11.

How God uses a wicked nation: ch. 10: 5-19.

A song mocking the king of Babylon: ch. 14: 4-21.

Trust in God, not in Egypt: ch. 31.

In The Book of Isaiah, writings of other prophets have been inserted or added. Many scholars believe that chs. 24 to 27 were written much later than Isaiah's time, and that chs. 40 to 66 were written at the close of the Exile.

#### THE GREAT UNNAMED PROPHET

The sudden change in style, viewpoint, and purpose in The Book of Isaiah which occurs at the beginning of ch. 40 is striking. The natural inference is that another mind is at work here. Chapter 43: 5, 6 shows that the Jews were scattered across the world when this section was written; and ch. 44: 28 indicates the date, the time of King Cyrus of Persia, under whose reign the Jews returned to Palestine in 538 B.C. The conclusion, based on this and considerable further evidence, is that chs. 40 to 55 were written by a great prophet whose name is not known but who lived in the time of exile. Chapters 56 to 66 are addressed to a definite community centering in Jerusalem. Some think that these chapters are the work of the same prophet who wrote chs. 40 to 55, but others hold that chs. 56 to 66 were written by a group of followers of the great unknown prophet. The name that is usually given to this prophet is "Second Isaiah."

It was customary in ancient times to copy writings on long rolls, and often two or more books were placed on a single roll. At some time in the course of the years these later chapters, chs. 40 to 66, were copied on the same roll that contained the work of the eighth-century prophet Isaiah. As the years passed, the entire roll went under the name of Isaiah.

Some persons have felt that because the whole book bears the name of Isaiah, it is necessary to maintain that all of it was written by him in the eighth century B.C. It then becomes necessary to suppose that he had the power to project himself into the period two hundred years later and to write as though he were living in that period. Many, however, who

are equally reverent in their approach to Scripture find it simpler to hold the conclusions stated above, assuming that chs. 40 to 66 were written in the times to which they constantly refer and by a prophet who was passionately concerned to be God's spokesman to the people of his time. It can be said of all Scripture that what matters is not the name of its human author, but that its divine Author should speak through it today as he did to the people for whom it was first written.

#### THE BOOK OF SECOND ISAIAH

Let us imagine a summer day about the year 550 B.C. in a little colony of Hebrew exiles in the Euphrates Valley. Life for them is no different from what it was yesterday or last year or ten years ago. They are never permitted to forget for long that they are a subject people without any of the rights of citizens. Their days of freedom lie in the past when they were a nation with a land of their own. They are allowed to have their own homes and even to engage in farming or in business. But always they are reminded of their inferior position by some new restriction.

Some members of the colony are more restless and dissatisfied than others. There are many who make light of the difficulties; they have frankly accepted the conditions of Babylonian life, and in their ways as well as their thinking are quickly becoming like the Babylonians. They make a practice of worshiping in the nearby temples of Babylonian gods. They are certain that, if they follow this course, before many years they will be recognized as Babylonian citizens with full rights. Opposed to them within the Hebrew community are those who are not able to turn their backs so lightly upon the hope of Israel. Some of them are old men who saw the walls of Jerusalem broken down in 586 B.C. and who dream of a day when Jerusalem will be rebuilt and the

nation go forward afresh in its own land to fulfill its destiny. There are young men who have the same dream. They never saw Palestine; they have lived all their lives in exile, but they have read the story of their people and have seen that for centuries God has been trying to work out through them a purpose of which other nations know nothing. They have read the books of Amos and Hosea, of Jeremiah and Micah, and they know that the fearful disasters that befell both Israel and Judah were the just consequence of the nation's sin and unfaithfulness to God. God was breaking them down that he might begin over again to build them on their true foundation.

To all whose minds are filled with these thoughts the great fear is that their people will lose themselves among their pagan neighbors and there will be no future for Israel. As the years pass it becomes harder and ever harder to believe that God is going to rescue them. Perhaps he has cast off his people utterly and forever because of their sin and will no longer be their God. More and more frequently the thought comes: Why hold out any longer? Life will be easier if we forget our hopes and adapt ourselves to the ways of our Babylonian neighbors.

#### A LETTER FROM A PROPHET

Now, on that summer day sometime near 550 B.C., a letter comes to these exiles, and its contents prove more important than anything that has happened in the colony for years. It is a letter from a new prophet in Israel, for only through letters could a prophet speak to a people scattered through many lands. We do not know where the prophet himself lived at this time. Some have thought that he was in Babylonia, others that he was in Palestine, and yet others that he was in Egypt or Syria. The reason it is so hard, and perhaps impossible, to tell where he was is that he spoke, not to

a people in one place, but to the Hebrew people in all the places where they lived.

The opening words of the letter were like an arrow pointed at the despair of the exiles.

“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.

Speak to the heart of Jerusalem, and cry unto her,

That her time of bond service is over,

That her iniquity is pardoned.”\* (ch. 40: 1, 2).

The exiles clustered about the scribe who had been called in to read the letter, and they fairly drank in the words as they were spoken.

“Hark! someone is calling,

Prepare ye in the wilderness a way for the Lord,

Make level in the desert a highway for our God”\* (ch. 40: 3).

Their hearts leaped within them. God himself was coming to deliver them! The outlook was no longer hopeless. God who brought their fathers out of Egypt long centuries before would show that he was still the same God with the same power and the same care for his people. They listened again to the reading.

“Behold, the Lord God will come as a mighty one,

And his arm will rule for him. . . .

He will feed his flock like a shepherd:

He will gather the lambs in his arm,

And carry them in his bosom.

He will gently lead those that have their

young”\* (ch. 40: 10, 11).

#### “THE WORD OF GOD ABIDETH”

But how would God come to their rescue? The old doubts floated back into their minds again. It was all very well to

dream of God's coming and leading them back to Palestine, but the Babylonians were strong. Their guards watched every road. To start out for Palestine without permission would be to invite severe punishment. Surely their plight was one in which not even the great God of Israel himself could help them.

It was as though the prophet had guessed what would be in their minds. He went on to warn them that they could not measure the infinite power and purposes of God with the yardstick of their little human knowledge. He suggested to them that it would be as sensible to try to dip out the waters of the ocean by handfuls, or to measure the heavens with a foot rule, or to weigh out the mountains on tiny scales, as to think that they could compass the whole of God's purposes with their minds. God's power was far beyond the power of all the nations put together, and what he purposed he was able to accomplish.

Then the prophet had some sharp words to say about those who were turning lightly from the Lord and Creator of the whole earth to the worship of helpless images made of wood and gold and silver. He kept reminding them that all things, the stars in their courses as well as the destinies of men and of nations, were in God's hand. And he was *their* God! He had chosen them and made himself known to them. Did they really think that now he would forget them and let them perish? No! Men might grow discouraged and fail, but not God!

"Hast thou not known? Hast thou not heard?  
The everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of  
the ends of the earth,  
Fainteth not, neither is weary.  
There is no searching of his understanding.  
He giveth power to the faint;  
And to him that has no strength he increaseth  
might.

Even the youths shall faint and be weary,  
And the young men shall utterly fall:  
But they that wait for the Lord shall renew their  
strength;  
They shall mount up with wings as eagles;  
They shall run, and not be weary;  
They shall walk, and not faint" \* (ch. 40: 28-31).

To these exiles God no longer seemed far away. They realized suddenly that they were the ones who had been far away from God. They did not have to wait to go back to Palestine in order to renew their strength. Now, right where they were, they could begin to live in the strength of God's promise. As they went back to their homes a phrase kept ringing in their ears:

"The grass withereth, the flower fadeth:  
But the word of our God shall stand for ever" (v. 8).

They were no longer broken and dispirited. Their outward lot was the same as it had been before, but they had heard a song of triumph that made everything different.

#### A NEW DAY COMING

From time to time more letters came to the exiles. Each one helped them to see more clearly God's purpose for Israel. Over and over the prophet told them that it was a time, not for discouragement, but for hope. A new day was coming, and in that new day God would restore them as a nation and set them above all other nations. He pointed them to the story of the past. Did not God choose Abraham out of all the men of his time to be the father of a nation that would in a special way be God's own people? Did not God, in spite of all the stubborn rebellion of his people against him, yet preserve them through the years and raise up ever new leaders for them? To what nation other than Israel had

God entrusted the truth of his word, hiding it in their hearts and speaking it through their prophets so that they could never completely forget it? This was what made them his people and gave them a destiny different from all other peoples: through them God's word must go forth to the ends of the earth and must be made known to the people of all nations. Israel must be a nation of priests through whom men the world over would come to know God and to serve him.

Such were the great and daring thoughts that burst upon the minds of those who read these messages. It was glorious to count oneself part of a people with such a destiny. But when nothing happened immediately and life went on as before in the colony, many found it hard to keep from losing their enthusiasm and dropping back into the old mood of despair. Then would come a new letter from the prophet and hope would be kindled again.

#### GOD'S SUFFERING SERVANT

One problem that many Israelites had was why they who were God's own people had suffered so severely through the centuries. They could understand the suffering that came upon the nation because of its unfaithfulness. But that was not all the suffering that had to be endured. There was a further amount of suffering that came upon them as a direct consequence of their faithfulness. In fact, the more truly they were God's servants, giving themselves uncompromisingly to his will for them, the more difficult and painful was their life among their pagan and half-pagan neighbors. They were laughed at, they were cruelly treated, they found themselves hated, and for no other reason than that they were trying to be faithful to God.

The prophet spoke to them of this too. He told them that this was what it must always be like to be God's servant.

Perhaps he was thinking of Jeremiah and the hard things that he had had to endure at the hands of his fellow citizens when he spoke God's word to them. The prophet did not encourage the exiles to think that they could escape suffering if they were to fulfill their destiny as God's servant. But he showed them that suffering for faithfulness had a part in winning back to God those who were far from him, and that beyond the suffering lay a glorious triumph.

The servant of God suffers because he is God's man in a godless world. So speaks the prophet in ch. 53, and through all the ages the Christian Church has seen the finger of the prophet pointing directly to Jesus Christ, who

“Was wounded for our transgressions,  
Bruised for our iniquities;  
The chastisement of our peace was upon him;  
And by his stripes we are healed”\* (ch. 53:5).

Christians feel that no suffering in the history of the world has accomplished or can accomplish as much as that which Christ endured. The Church sings,

“In the cross of Christ I glory,  
Towering o'er the wrecks of time,”

and responds with,

“Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
That were a present far too small;  
Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my soul, my life, my all.”

And always the prophet was pleading for his people to take the help that God was offering. There was bread for their hunger and water for their thirst. None of them needed to go through another day broken or defeated. They could rise up and live *now* in the joy of God's purpose for them.

## A CHANGED SITUATION

In chs. 56 to 66 it is quite clear that the prophet is speaking, not to discouraged exiles in distant communities, but to the people of Jerusalem in whose midst he is living. The change is so great from chs. 40 to 55 that many scholars believe these chapters to be by another prophet, or prophets, deeply influenced by Second Isaiah. The situation is completely different from what it was before. Earlier the task was to kindle a renewed hope and faithfulness and sense of their divine calling in the hearts of the exiles; now it is to keep alive an understanding of God's purpose for Israel in a community that finds it easier to build a temple and offer sacrifices than to do works of justice and mercy. It is quite possible, however, that the same prophet fulfilled both these tasks.

The exiles who returned to Jerusalem in 538 B.C., when Cyrus captured Babylon and gave the Jews their freedom (Ezra 1: 1 ff.; Isa. 44: 28; 45: 1), expected to see their community rise swiftly from the ruins. It was a severe disappointment when they realized that the rebuilding of their city and the reordering of their native land would be a long, slow process beset by many difficulties. There were conflicting parties in the community, each trying to get the upper hand constantly, and there were men whose only concern was their own profit and advantage. Even among those who were supposed to be the friends of true religion there were many who dropped back quickly into the old mistake of thinking that they could keep God favorable to the community by building him a temple and offering him sacrifices regularly.

To be a prophet of God in this new situation was no easy matter. It meant speaking out sharply and clearly against some of the most important people in the community. It

meant challenging the whole basis upon which the life of Jerusalem was being rebuilt. A prophet who offered such severe criticisms of his people and their leaders at a time when they were struggling with the difficult problems of reconstruction was likely to be regarded as a nuisance, or even as a traitor.

There are indications at various points in these chapters that the prophet and those who believed as he did had a difficult time, having to endure scorn and hatred for the sake of their faith. In ch. 57: 3-5 those who mock at the prophet are accused of indulging in the grossest kinds of pagan religious practices. But in ch. 66: 1-6 the men who hate the prophet and his followers and cast them out of the community are those who are rebuilding the Temple and providing for its sacrifices. Thus it is clear that in the faithful discharge of his office as a prophet, making plain God's will for his people without fear or favor toward anyone, he had offended not only the pagan elements in the community but also the official representatives of religion and government. Well may the picture of the suffering servant of God stand in the midst of this prophet's writings, for he knew how high was the cost in suffering one had to pay for the privilege of remaining a faithful spokesman for God!

#### MAN'S PART AND GOD'S

In spite of antagonism and persecution, there was no slackening in the prophet's passionate concern for the help of his people. Care for the naked and hungry and lonely was a constant burden upon his mind, and he fiercely denied that any religion could be genuine that did not make men clothe the naked and feed the hungry (ch. 58). God would not bring his new day of light and salvation until men had sufficient faith in him to set his justice and truth as the immovable center of their lives (ch. 59). But it would not do

for men to forget the hope that was before them, the destiny of God's people one day to be a source of light and blessing and order to the whole earth (ch. 60). The task of the prophet was to bring men the good news that freedom and joy and a new life were at their very door if only they would turn to God with all their hearts (ch. 61). But he could also plead with God on behalf of his people, expressing their agony and despair at the greatness of the difficulties that confronted them and their longing for a new day to come (chs. 62 to 64).

It is not difficult to understand why Jesus felt such a kinship with this prophet, even using his words to describe his own ministry among men (Isa. 61: 1, 2; Luke 4: 18, 19). Each was "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief," and each had as the driving center of his ministry a great compassion for the souls of men who were being destroyed within themselves by their separation from God. So close do they come to each other that again and again we have the feeling that we are reading, not of a prophet of the sixth century B.C., but of Jesus Christ himself. Of this nameless prophet we might well say what Paul said of himself: that he lived; yet not he, but Christ lived in him.

**HOW TO READ ISAIAH, CHS. 40 TO 66.** Chapter 40 should be read, not just once, but two or three times, until you feel the compassion of the prophet as he speaks to his scattered people in their despair. With it read ch. 55, which gives a second magnificent example of the prophet as evangelist.

In chs. 41 to 49 you will find a number of themes being repeated in different ways and woven together differently in each chapter.

Ch. 42, like ch. 49, contains God's call for Israel to fulfill its destiny as his people and to establish his truth and righteousness for all mankind.

Chs. 44: 24-28 and 45: 1-4. King Cyrus is proclaimed as the deliverer of Israel and the restorer of Jerusalem.

Chs. 46; 47. The tyrant Babylon is to be destroyed.

Ch. 50: 5-11. The prophet seems in these verses to be describing his own difficult experiences.

Ch. 53. You cannot read this chapter without seeing, not only the sufferings of God's servants in Old Testament times, but, above all, the suffering of Jesus Christ upon his cross.

Note the changed situation from ch. 56 on. The prophet is speaking, not to scattered exiles, but to a community in Jerusalem.

Ch. 61: 1-4. Note Jesus' use of this passage in Luke 4: 17 ff.

Ch. 64. A passionate prayer by the prophet on behalf of his people.

Ch. 66. The prophet is in conflict with those who falsely put their trust in Temple and sacrifices rather than in God's truth and righteousness.

## jeremiah : Lamentations

**J**EREMIAH was the most unpopular man of his time. Everyone thought he was a traitor. Few understood him, much less loved him. It goes hard with a man when no one trusts him, and Jeremiah was a sensitive soul. With a touch of humor mixed with despair, he cried out, "I have neither lent nor borrowed, yet every man curses me" \* (ch. 15: 10). He reproached the Lord for having persuaded him to be a prophet at all.

But he could not help being a prophet. More than once he tried to give it up, and said he would never speak in the name of God again. But the word of God was in his heart like a fire.

We know more about the inner life of Jeremiah than that of any other prophet. In contrast to Amos, who tells us only what his business was, and to Hosea, of whom we know only the story of his tragic marriage, and in even greater contrast to men like Nahum or Zephaniah, who tell us nothing directly about themselves, Jeremiah pours out his mind and heart for us to see.

He was very young when God called him (ch. 1). Unlike Isaiah, who was overwhelmed with a sense of sin and shame in God's presence, Jeremiah felt only weakness and ignorance. Isaiah said, "I am undone." Jeremiah said, "I am a child—I know not how to speak." \* He knew from the beginning that his role as a prophet would be a hard one. Kings, princes, priests, and people—they would all be against him.

But he would be "a fortified city, and an iron pillar, and brazen walls," \* against them. "They shall not prevail . . . ; for I am with thee, . . . to deliver thee," was the assurance God gave him.

#### AN UNPOPULAR REFORMER

In 621 B.C. the Book of the Law (the major part of Deuteronomy) was discovered in the Temple. On the basis of the laws in this book, and with the support of the people, the king, Josiah, instituted a series of reforms (II Kings, chs. 22; 23). The idolatrous worship of false gods and goddesses was abolished, and all the images destroyed. All local sanctuaries and high places, where the people of Judah had been accustomed to worship, were shut down. From that time on, worship was to be centralized in the Temple at Jerusalem. In a dramatic ceremony, the king, the nobles, and the people all bound themselves by solemn oath to obey the commands and precepts in the Book of the Law, and to love God and serve him with all their hearts.

The young prophet was caught up in this wave of enthusiasm for the new law. He went through the streets of the city, heralding the reforms, proclaiming the words of the covenant, urging men to forsake their evil ways and hold fast to the law of the Lord.

To his family, however, the new law was a disaster. To them, in the little village of Anathoth, and to all the other country priests scattered throughout the land, the law meant the end of their livelihood. No longer could services be held or sacrifices offered at their altars and sanctuaries. The law specifically provided that there was to be only one sanctuary in Judah: the great Temple at Jerusalem. Josiah's soldiers ranged the countryside, destroying the now illegal altars, arresting lawbreaking priests, and dragging them off to be punished.

The priests of Anathoth were sworn enemies of the new law, and of all who held to it. When their own relative, Jeremiah, a priest by birth, publicly acclaimed the law, they determined to kill him. Twice, attempts were made on Jeremiah's life. Twice God warned him, and he escaped. The first time, Jeremiah interceded with the Lord to save his would-be assassins from their merited punishment. After the second attempt on his life, the prophet bitterly called down God's judgment upon them and their families. His chief complaint, however, was against God, who, he felt, was responsible for the cleavage between him and his relatives and friends.

"Thou hast deceived me, O Lord,  
And I let myself be deceived. . . .  
I have become a laughing-stock all day long,  
Every one makes fun of me.  
Whenever I speak, I must cry out,  
Violence and spoil, I must say.  
If I say, I will not mention it,  
Nor speak again in his name,  
Then it is in my heart like a burning fire  
Shut up in my bones,  
And I am worn out with holding it back" \*  
(ch. 20:7-9).

#### THE DEEPER SICKNESS OF THE NATION

It was not long before Jeremiah saw that Josiah's reforms were having only a superficial effect. While the people conformed outwardly to the law, inwardly they had not changed. The old idols were gone, but the Temple at Jerusalem became a new idol. Jeremiah went to the Temple itself, and denounced the leaders and the people in scathing terms.

They observed feasts and ceremonies with diligence, but not the weightier matters of justice, truth, mercy, and love. They had reformed the system of sacrifices, but not their

own hearts. The true sacrifice that God desired, a broken pride and a contrite spirit, they never offered. They made a great show of Temple services, but humble prayer was unknown among them. Self-righteousness, individual and national, was their sin. They reasoned in a tight circle, saying that their righteousness was the source of their success; their prosperity was proof of their righteousness. Was not the Temple, the earthly abode of the living God, in the midst of their land, a permanent guarantee of security? God would never permit his sanctuary to be threatened, much less destroyed, or his people to be attacked.

Steeled by the growing hostility of his audience, Jeremiah fiercely pressed home the indictment. Neither this nation nor any nation that sets itself above the laws of God shall long escape the wrath of God. As for these men, their righteousness is filth, their faith hypocrisy. The sacrifices they bring are but a part of the loot they have stolen. The hands they lift to heaven are stained with innocent blood. When they have multiplied transgressions, then they come and stand before the Lord in the Temple, and say, "We are safe."

The prophet hurls their own words back at them. He cries out contemptuously: "The temple of the Lord, The temple of the Lord, The temple of the Lord."

"Go now to my sanctuary that was at Shiloh, where I formerly established my name, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of my people Israel. So now, because you have done all these deeds . . . I will do to this house, which bears my name, in which you trust . . . as I did to Shiloh. And I will cast you out of my sight, as I cast out all your kinsmen, even the whole race of Ephraim"\*(ch 7:12-15).

And yet while Jeremiah thunders condemnation his heart is torn with grief for his people. The inner conflict that was ever present in his life is brought out sharply:

"My heart is sick within me. . . .  
For the wound of the daughter of my people  
I am wounded.  
Is there no balm in Gilead?  
Is there no physician there?" \* (ch. 8:18, 21, 22).

He loved his people with all his heart, yet he had to proclaim to them their certain destruction. That conflict troubled him all his life. At first he hoped that the people would repent of their sins and be saved from their fate. With the failure of Josiah's reform, that hope disappeared. Later on, the promise of a future restoration would partially resolve the dilemma, but for the present it was almost more than he could bear. Wistfully, he thought:

"O that I had in the desert a wayfarer's lodging;  
That I might leave my people, and go away from  
them!" \* (ch. 9:2).

But Jeremiah had little time to think of his own troubles. Instead, he had to continue to bear the burden of the Lord. He had to bring the word of the Lord to the people as long and as often as possible. The call was not for tomorrow. It was *now* that he was needed. And *now* he was commanded to perform a symbolic act before the leaders of the people.

Taking an earthenware flask, he went out with some of the elders and priests to the valley called Hinnom (or Topheth). There at the entrance to the potsherd gate, among the heaps of shards, he gave them this further revelation. Pointing to the mounds of broken pots, he told them that in this valley of slaughter and abomination, where men had slaughtered their children in vain sacrifice, the fighting men of Judah and Jerusalem would fall, in days to come, beneath the swords of their enemies, and their dead bodies would be left as food for the birds. He described the grim

horrors of the siege and the ultimate fall of the city. Then, smashing the flask he carried, he prophesied to the men who were with him:

"Thus saith the Lord, As the potter's vessel is broken and cannot be mended again, so will I break this people and this city; and they shall be buried in Tophet till there is no more room to bury" \* (ch. 19:11).

The reaction to these messages was naturally hostile. His attacks upon the state could not be ignored. Surrounded by powerful enemies as it was, the government could only view the prophet with deep suspicion. Unable to comprehend Jeremiah's profound devotion to his people, the leaders accused him of fomenting rebellion. At the instigation of Pashhur, the son of the chief overseer of the Temple, Jeremiah was arrested, beaten, and placed in the stocks overnight. For a man of gentle and sensitive spirit, this was an unusually painful experience. But as the situation of the country became more desperate, much harsher measures were taken, and the prophet's life was constantly in danger.

#### TWILIGHT OF A NATION

Events moved rapidly to fulfill the words of Jeremiah. In 609 B.C., Pharaoh-Necho led his army out of Egypt along the coast of Palestine to Syria. King Josiah regarded this move as a threat to the security and sovereignty of Judah. Convinced of the righteousness of Judah's cause and persuaded that the God, whose laws he had enforced throughout the length and breadth of the land, would support him in battle, Josiah set out with his army to block the Pharaoh's line of march. The expedition ended disastrously for the Judean king at Megiddo (in Northern Israel). Josiah was slain in battle, and his army badly defeated. The body of the beloved monarch was brought in a chariot to Jerusalem, where a

grief-stricken city paid its last respects. A tragic blow had been dealt to the hopes of the people, but patriotism was not yet dead. Desperately the nation asserted its independence and directly challenged the Pharaoh by anointing Jehoahaz, a son of Josiah, king.

Necho waited for three months and then summoned the young king to Riblah, on the Orontes in Syria. Shortly thereafter Jehoahaz was sent in chains to Egypt, where he died. Necho laid a heavy tax on the country, and appointed Eliakim, another son of Josiah, the new king. On ascending the throne, the new king took the name of Jehoiakim.

Jehoiakim proved to be a cruel autocrat, totally indifferent to the plight of his subjects and concerned solely with maintaining his throne and building spacious palaces for himself. To indulge his luxurious tastes, he heaped heavy taxes upon the already impoverished people. Completely without zeal for the law, he encouraged a return to the idolatrous practices stamped out by his father, Josiah. With the moral failure of the king, the entire structure of the Deuteronomic reform toppled. Sacred prostitution and child sacrifice were added to the lengthy list of popular evils. False prophets filled the air with easy assurances of peace and prosperity, deceitfully misleading the people. Thus engulfed in debauchery, the nation stumbled uncertainly toward its end.

#### ENEMIES ON EVERY SIDE

Once more Jeremiah appeared at the Temple, to preach to the people and to warn them again of the catastrophe that threatened if they did not repent. The priests and false prophets seized him, determined to have him put to death. They dragged him before the princes and the nobles, sitting as a court of justice, and put him on trial for his life. The people, however, intervened in his behalf. They said,

"This man does not deserve to die: for he has spoken to us in the name of the Lord our God." \*

Others came to his defense, pointing out that Jeremiah was not the first to prophesy the destruction of the Temple. The prophet Micah, a hundred years before, had said the same; and the king, Hezekiah, and his nobles, far from killing the man for this, took his warning to heart and repented of their sins. Jeremiah's defenders pointed out that, because of this, God had relented and saved the Temple and the city. Their arguments prevailed, and Jeremiah, with the help of a powerful prince, Ahikam, escaped with his life.

Shortly after this harrowing episode, Jeremiah prepared, with the help of his friend and secretary, Baruch, a selection of prophecies dating from the first twenty years of his ministry. It proved to be a long and difficult task, for they did not complete the book until the next year. Then, following Jeremiah's instructions, Baruch took the scroll to the Temple, and read it to the crowds gathered there. Before long, the matter was reported to the king, who sent for the scroll and had it read to him in the presence of his nobles and attendants. As each few columns of the book were read to Jehoiakim, he took them contemptuously, cut them with a penknife, and burned them in the brazier before him. A group of nobles, already familiar with the contents of the book, begged him not to destroy it, but he ignored their pleas, and proceeded with the reading, the penknife, and the fire.

Then he sent his servants to arrest Jeremiah and Baruch. They had received timely warning from the friendly nobles and were in hiding. While the royal officers searched in vain for them, Jeremiah took a new scroll and had Baruch write on it all the words of the book that the king had destroyed, and "many other words were added to them." \*

Jeremiah did not cease to warn the king and the people of the danger approaching from the north, telling them that

Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, was the chosen instrument of God to wreak vengeance on this self-righteous and unrepentant nation. To him it was an outrage against the Lord to put trust in foreign alliances, in armies and fortresses.

Jehoiakim, who had astutely transferred his allegiance from the Pharaoh, Necho, to Nebuchadnezzar after the battle of Carchemish (605 B.C.), became restless after a few years under this new authority, and at the instigation of the false prophets and pro-Egyptian diplomats finally revolted. Nebuchadnezzar immediately dispatched troops to quell the uprising, and these Babylonians, in alliance with the native garrisons of the neighboring vassal states, Edom, Moab, and Ammon, laid siege to Jerusalem. During the course of the siege, Jehoiakim died, leaving a shattered kingdom to his eighteen-year-old son, Jehoiachin.

Apparently the new king's first and only official act was to surrender the city to Nebuchadnezzar, who arrived on the scene three months later. Thus in 597 B.C. the Judean king and his court, together with the "mighty men of valor," the craftsmen, and the smiths, were deported to Babylonia. None remained behind except the poorest people of the land. Jeremiah was among those who stayed, while among those who went was a young priest and future prophet, Ezekiel.

Nebuchadnezzar appointed as king a younger son of Josiah, who thereupon assumed the throne name Zedekiah. He was apparently a man of good intentions, but weak-willed. He took the oath of allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar, and meant to remain submissive. But the temper of the people was far otherwise. Unchecked now by the more conservative upper classes, who had been deported, they plunged into orgies of excess. Seizing the property of the wealthy exiles, they began to strut and boast, "This land is

ours." They regarded themselves as the true remnant, chosen of God, and the exiles as lost men cut off from their inheritance in Israel. Instead of being humbled by disaster, the Jerusalem population was actually more vain than ever.

Jeremiah had a double problem on his hands now: the problem of these conceited fools in Jerusalem, who might at any time stage another hopeless revolt, and the problem of the exiles over in Babylonia, who were on edge all the time, expecting any day that something would turn up to make it possible for them to return home. To the exiles he wrote a letter (ch. 29), saying in effect: "Don't let any of the false prophets fool you. You will not come back; neither will most of your children. Build houses, plant vineyards, make yourselves comfortable. You will not see Jerusalem again." To those who remained in Jerusalem Jeremiah preached a curious sermon on two baskets of figs. One basket held very fine figs, the best on the market. The other had in it figs that were so rotten that they could not be eaten. "Now," said Jeremiah, "you people in Jerusalem and Judah, you are the bad figs, good for nothing and doomed to perish. The exiles, whom you despise, are really the good figs." The future belonged to the exiles, yet Jeremiah stayed in Judah, among the bad figs. His heart was with the rejected; his work was with the lost.

#### BLIND POLITICIANS

The people of Judah persisted in their dream of independence. Demagogues and rabble rousers fanned the fires of patriotism. A group of inexperienced, hotheaded young nationalists entered into negotiations with the neighboring small countries. A loose coalition was formed, whose chief military asset was hoped-for aid from Egypt, a completely untrustworthy ally.

In spite of the absurdity of the scheme, the diplomats were able to persuade the weakling king, Zedekiah, that it

would succeed. At the last minute, Jeremiah heard of the plot and denounced it. Zedekiah changed his stand once more and now sided with Jeremiah. Fearing, however, that Nebuchadnezzar might have heard rumors of the plan, Zedekiah journeyed to Babylonia, to allay suspicion and reaffirm his loyalty to the Chaldean crown.

In the ninth year of his reign, 589 B.C., Zedekiah, unable to resist any longer the pressure of the patriots within or of his allies without, declared Judah independent. Tyre and Ammon promptly joined the revolt, while Edom and Philistia, seeing a chance to gain at the expense of their neighbors, remained loyal to Nebuchadnezzar. Egypt intrigued behind the scenes, promised much help, supplied little. Nebuchadnezzar established his headquarters at Riblah, sent a task force against Tyre, invaded Judah with his main army, and laid siege to Jerusalem.

As the siege progressed, the people recognized more and more that Jeremiah's teaching was true. He, against all the prophets of prosperity and well-being, had given a true picture of their fate; and they were badly frightened at the prospect of its fulfillment. The king, the nobles, and all the officials of Judah gathered at the Temple to appease the wrath of God against them. They offered sacrifices in profusion, and also took upon themselves the solemn obligation to release all their fellow Hebrew slaves as a sign of repentance, of fair dealing, and of their devotion to God. As if in answer to the unspoken prayer of all, an Egyptian relief column suddenly crossed the border into Palestine. The Babylonians were compelled to raise the siege, and their armies moved off to meet the new enemy. As soon as the siege was raised, the lords of the land, recently so fearful of death and exile, so humble and penitent before God, repudiated their solemn word and pressed the released slaves back into bond service.

Jeremiah at once attacked the deceitful nobles. He had thought to see his people freed from the burden of slavery and instead had seen them betrayed. His words rang in the ears of his hearers:

"Thus saith the Lord; Since you have not listened to me in regard to the proclamation of liberty to one another, behold, I am making you a proclamation of liberty to the sword, pestilence, and famine: and I will make you a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth. And as for the men who have broken my covenant . . . , the princes of Judah and Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land, . . . I will give them into the hands of their enemies, and their dead bodies shall be food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth. . . . Behold, I am issuing orders and will bring the Babylonians back to the city; and they shall fight against it, and shall take it and shall burn it. And the cities of Judah will I make a desolation, without an inhabitant" \* (ch. 34:17-22).

#### THE PRISONER

Judah enjoyed a few fitful weeks of peace, while the Babylonians were engaged in defeating the Egyptian army. This turn of events only increased difficulties for Jeremiah. For a moment his enemies were free of other responsibilities and set out to trap him. One day he went from Jerusalem to the Benjamin country where he had been born, to look after certain lands belonging to him. The guard at the gate of the city arrested him, accusing him of trying to desert to the Babylonians. The prophet was brought before the princes of the court, who were only too ready to find this troublemaker guilty as charged. He was confined to a makeshift prison in the house of Jonathan the scribe, where he remained for many days until sent for by the king. Zedekiah was unhappy about the military situation and asked the prophet privately whether there was any word from the

Lord. There was: "You shall be given into the hand of the king of Babylon" (ch. 37: 17).

Zedekiah was afraid to release Jeremiah because he feared the princes and the people; at the same time he wished to have him nearby for secret consultations. So he transferred Jeremiah to the guard court, where he was boarded at the king's expense.

While there, Jeremiah continued to speak the word of God. He warned the people that whoever remained in the city would die—if not by the sword then certainly by fire, or by the pestilence that follows in the wake of conquering armies. For that reason, he told them, it would be far better to go out and surrender to the Babylonians. His enemies among the nobles, hearing these words, went to the king and demanded that he be put to death. He was undermining the morale of the soldiers, as well as of the people of the city. For Jeremiah still refused to consider the nation or the city first. To him, it was far more important that the people be left alive than that the city remain standing. The militarists opposed this vigorously and pressed the king to surrender his prisoner to them. Zedekiah, caught between opposing forces, indecisively gave ground in all directions, and let his strong-willed nobles have their way.

These men took Jeremiah from the guard court and lowered him into a filthy cistern, where he was left to die. An Ethiopian eunuch, Ebed-melech, hearing of Jeremiah's plight, went to the king, and sought permission from him to rescue the prophet. Except for this brief appearance in the light of history, Ebed-melech is completely unknown to us. We know only that he was a saint, beloved of the Lord. In him there was a tender concern for his fellow man which found expression in the deliverance of the prophet, in the gentle manner of his rescue, the lavish care he bestowed upon a hunted and hated man, whom to know was dangerous

and whom to befriend was to risk one's life.

The king, cheerfully reversing his position once more, sent thirty servants along with Ebed-melech to assist in the rescue. They drew Jeremiah out of the well and brought him back to the guard court, where he remained until the fall of the city. He expressed his gratitude to the Ethiopian by promising him, in the name of the Lord, that whatever happened to the city and its people, he would come through the ordeal safely.

#### A RAY OF HOPE

In these last days, Jeremiah turned his thoughts increasingly to the future. As despair and doom had been his message, so now hope and restoration were the theme of his oracles:

"Behold, days are coming, is the oracle of the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: not like the covenant which I made with their fathers, . . . which they broke . . . , but I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every one his neighbor, and every one his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for all of them shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them" \* (ch. 31:31-34).

As an expression of his positive faith that Israel would eventually be restored to its land, he purchased a piece of property from a cousin, who shrewdly offered to sell it just as the Babylonians were about to capture it. The act seemed to everyone a foolish one. But Jeremiah assured them the property was safe.

"Has not the Lord promised that where there are now ruined cities, the homesteads of shepherds shall stand once

again, and flocks shall pass once more under the hands of the one who counts them?"

"In those days, and at that time, I will cause to grow up for David a righteous shoot; and he shall do justice and righteousness in the land. In those days shall Judah be delivered, and Jerusalem shall dwell in safety: and this is what they shall call him, The Lord is our righteousness" \* (ch. 33: 15, 16).

This was the climax of his message. Beyond the day of judgment was the day of redemption. Beyond the figure of Nebuchadnezzar, the instrument of God's wrath, was the greater figure of the Messiah, the anointed Servant of God, the agent of his salvation.

#### THE DEATH OF A NATION

The end came swiftly for Judah. The Babylonians defeated the Egyptian army and then resumed the siege of Jerusalem in earnest. The city held out a year longer amid great suffering and privation. In July, 586, a breach was made in the wall, and the Babylonian army poured into the city. Zedekiah fled with a band of troops, but was overtaken in the plains of Jericho, and brought before Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah. There Zedekiah's sons were brought and slain before his eyes. He himself was then blinded, bound in fetters, and taken to Babylon, where he was imprisoned until his death.

A month later, Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard, destroyed the city and razed the Temple to the ground. He put to death the ringleaders of the rebellion, and deported the rest of the city's population to Babylonia. Only the poorest classes of the rural areas were left behind, to be vinedressers and husbandmen.

Gedaliah, the son of Ahikam, a wise and judicious man, was appointed governor of the land by Nebuchadnezzar.

Jeremiah, who still preferred to stay in the country of his birth, joined the son of his old friend and protector in the task of rebuilding Judah. Before Gedaliah was able to consolidate his position, however, he was assassinated by Ishmael, a prince of the royal house. The people feared that the Babylonians would hold them responsible for the murder of the royal governor, and exact severe penalties. Therefore they decided to flee to Egypt, but sent to Jeremiah for advice. He strongly urged them to remain in the land, promising them that they would inherit it and grow wealthy. On the other hand, if they fled to Egypt, all the evils that they feared would overtake them. As in the past, the people did not listen to him, but accused him of trying to betray them to the Chaldean garrison. Whereupon they set out for Egypt, forcing Jeremiah and Baruch to accompany them.

Jeremiah's ministry ended as it had begun, with the prophet unwillingly bearing a message of doom to stubborn people who refused to listen.

#### SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

Jeremiah was a central link in the chain of God's men from Moses to Jesus. Facing the critical issue of his time—could Israel's faith survive Israel's fall?—Jeremiah repeated an old truth: this religion was not created by Israel the nation, but was itself the foundation upon which the nation had been built, the source of its unity and strength. The nation could not survive the loss of its faith, but faith would survive the loss of the nation. Let the land be overrun, let the people be taken into captivity, let the sacred objects be taken, let the Temple itself be destroyed. Religion had no fundamental need of any of these. The exiles in Babylon could pray to God as well as the people in Jerusalem; those on the banks of the Chebar as well as those in the Court of the Temple. With the stripping away of the glitter and

dross, the spiritual essence of Israel's religion was brought into focus: man's adoration of God, his yearning for his Lord; God's gracious love for man, his seeking out of his children. With the fall of the nation, the individual emerged as the basic unit of religious action.

Jeremiah raised the faith of Israel to a new level of the personal and spiritual. His own life of prayer and communion with God became a model for men of all time; his devotional writings set a pattern for all subsequent generations.

**HOW TO READ JEREMIAH.** The Book of Jeremiah, as it has come to us, is not in chronological order. For this reason the reader is in need of careful guidance. The following is suggested, not as a guide to the whole book, but to help you find some of the high lights in Jeremiah's career:

His call: ch. 1: 4-19.

An early sermon: chs. 7: 1 to 8: 3.

Jeremiah's despair: chs. 15: 10; 20: 7-18.

The sermon on the broken jug: ch. 19: 1-15.

Jeremiah advises surrender: ch. 21: 1-10; predicts defeat: ch. 37: 1-10.

His enemies the false prophets: ch. 23: 9-40.

The sermon on the two baskets of figs: ch. 24.

How and where Jeremiah preached; how his enemies were foiled: ch. 26.

Prophet against prophet; duel of words with Hananiah: ch. 28.

Jeremiah's letter to the Israelites in Babylon: ch. 29.

Jeremiah buys land from under the enemy army: ch. 32: 1-15.

A plea for justice to slaves: ch. 34: 8-22.

How Jeremiah wrote his prophecies; private secretary Baruch: ch. 36.

In and out of jail: chs. 37: 11 to 38: 28.

The city is captured; Jeremiah is free: ch. 39.

In the time of Gedaliah the governor; murder and migration: chs. 40: 1 to 43: 7.

In Egypt; Jeremiah vs. the queen of heaven: ch. 44.

Other notable passages in Jeremiah's writings:

The terror of God: ch. 4: 23-31.

"Can the leopard change his spots?" ch. 13: 23.

Sermon on the potter and the clay: ch. 18: 1-12.

The new covenant in the heart: ch. 31.

#### THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

The destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. could never be forgotten by its people. The razing of the Temple of the Lord cut deeply into their memory, and ever afterward they marked history from that day. If they did not always remember that it was a sign of God's wrath, his judgment upon them for their sins, they never forgot its sorrow, or the suffering of the inhabitants of the Holy City.

In Lamentations, the poet did not record the military and political statistics of that tragic event. But in words that wring the heart, he told the human story of incredible distress and hardship. He described the horror of the siege as it affected individuals: men and women starving in the streets, the proud princes forced to beg for bread, wealthy merchants being sold into slavery, and those others who deserted to the enemy buying their lives at the price of their souls. The cries of children pleading for food haunted the poet; and he watched while hunger-maddened mothers slew their own babies. All the inhuman brutality that accompanies war, the terrible suffering and despair that reduces men to the level of beasts—all this the poet lived through. This is the burden of his lament.

He spoke of Jerusalem as a widow, weeping through the long night, deserted by those who loved her, betrayed by false friends in her final hour. Why did this happen to Jerusalem? he asked. Why did God make of his holy city a heap of ruins? Surely it was because of the sins of her people. It was because they had rebelled against God, like the people of ancient Sodom. As God had destroyed that city in his wrath, so now he had sent a ruthless enemy to lay waste Jerusalem.

At the end, the poet found a word of hope. He recalled that the "merciful acts of the Lord never end, his compassionate deeds never fail" \* (ch. 3: 22). If the wayward people would repent, if they would wait patiently on the Lord, he would have mercy upon them, he would come to them in love and bring them peace.

The passionate and beautiful lament for Jerusalem closes with a prayer for the forgiveness of God.

In most English Bibles, the book bears the title The Lamentations of Jeremiah. An old tradition affirms that the prophet, who lived through the siege and fall of the city, composed the poem. Other evidence, however, indicates that popular legend attached the name of the great man to the otherwise anonymous work. Who the author was cannot be determined from anything in the book.

**HOW TO READ LAMENTATIONS.** Put yourself in the position of a people whose city and homes have been destroyed and who have seen members of their families butchered or carried into exile. Then read this book, asking yourself what faith in God meant to these people in the time of their misfortune.

~~~~~ CHAPTER 16 ~~~~

ezekiel

ETHE Book of Ezekiel will seem strange and different after the writings of the other prophets. You will come upon visions and weird descriptions. You may be puzzled by the symbolic language.

Ezekiel on one occasion had a vision of a valley of dry bones. That was his way of picturing the defeated spirits of his people in exile. Again he saw waters flowing out from under the Temple wall into the desert and making the desert fruitful. That was his way of describing how God's grace and help flow forth into the parched life of men, transforming its barrenness into fruitfulness wherever they reach. Ezekiel's symbolic language has a rich meaning behind it if you take the trouble to translate it.

Visions will be less strange to you if you understand that where you would speak of *hearing* the truth, the prophet often finds it more natural to speak of *seeing* what is true. Ezekiel had a vision of God sitting upon a throne, but elsewhere the Bible expresses the same truth when it calls God the King of kings. After all, it makes little difference whether it is through the eyes of faith or the ears of faith that our knowledge of God comes to us.

A PRIEST WHO WAS ALSO A PROPHET

There were few among the prophets who spoke well of the priesthood. Amos denounced the priests at Beth-el bitterly; Isaiah characterized them as reeling with drink, stum-

bling while giving judgment. Hosea blamed the ignorance of the people on lazy and blasphemous priests. Nevertheless, two of Judah's greatest prophets were priests: Jeremiah the son of Hilkiah, a priest at Anathoth; and Ezekiel, the son of Buzi, apparently one of the descendants of Zadok, high priest under David and Solomon. Of these two, Jeremiah reacted strongly against his background, and was continually at odds with the priests of his family. He turned away from the formalism and emphasis upon ritual that marked the religion of the priests.

In Ezekiel, a rare combination of priest and prophet was achieved. He received his training for the priesthood at the Temple in Jerusalem. This instruction was principally in the techniques of religion: the order of Temple services, the regulation of sacrifices, the forms and procedures of public worship. Ezekiel paid close attention to the organization and functions of the priests throughout his life, and wrote at length on the administration of Temple affairs.

Ezekiel's education, however, was not limited to practical exercises in the duties of a priest. Among the strongest supporters of King Josiah's reform (see Chapter XV on Jeremiah) were the Temple priests. The Book of the Law, now embodied in Deuteronomy, had been discovered in the Temple by the priests, and they had urged the king to carry out its provisions. On the basis of this law, the local sanctuaries were closed down and all public worship was located exclusively at the Temple in Jerusalem. Full responsibility for the religious life of Judah was laid upon the Jerusalem priests. Some, but not all, among them were deeply aware of the spiritual roots of their faith. In their teaching they emphasized the necessity for faith in God, and for adoration and love on the part of the people, before worship could be effective. The requirements of the covenant could not be met by a formal observance of laws, but only by an inner

devotion to God, an acknowledgment of his authority and love. Ezekiel grew up in the period of reform, and was strongly influenced by these enlightened priests.

EZEKIEL AND JEREMIAH

Long before Ezekiel began to prophesy, the basic pattern of his thought had been shaped. His background and training supplied important principles; others were derived from the prophet Jeremiah. Ezekiel was perhaps twenty years younger than Jeremiah, and would have had ample opportunity to meet the older man, and hear his teachings. No meeting between the men has been recorded, and whether or not they knew each other personally must remain a question. But Ezekiel was certainly familiar with Jeremiah's principles, and adopted the older man's position generally.

Jeremiah was convinced that Jerusalem could not escape judgment, final and catastrophic. But if there was to be a total destruction, there would also be a restoration. Jeremiah was certain that God would not utterly repudiate his people, but would one day re-establish them in the land. With this Ezekiel agreed emphatically. The relationship between God and Israel was indestructible. That made certain the ultimate return of the exiles, and the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

According to Jeremiah, this would require a completely new beginning. Restoration was dependent upon a new heart. Then Israel would live, not under the old covenant, which had been violated, but under a new covenant (Jer. 31: 33). Here too Ezekiel was in agreement, for he could see that the new regime could not succeed without a basic moral rebirth.

Their political views were very much alike. Jeremiah was convinced that Judah would be punished for its sins, and that God had chosen the Babylonians to accomplish

his purpose. Therefore he favored submission to the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar. For maintaining this position, Jeremiah became the most hated man in the country. He found only one consolation, one support: a continuous communion with God. Ezekiel preached an equally unpopular message and suffered from the stupidity, stubbornness, and hostility of his hearers. Like Jeremiah, he found in God the source of comfort and strength.

THE CALL

Ezekiel was one of those deported to Babylonia after the first conquest of Judah in 597 B.C. While Nebuchadnezzar pursued a moderate policy toward the exiles, their lot nevertheless was hard. The long journey across the desert had decimated their numbers and left a permanent mark of suffering on the survivors. The defeat of their nation, the loss of independence, and the forced banishment from the holy fatherland rankled deeply. They regarded their new home as a prison, and looked longingly to the west for deliverance. So long as the nation existed and the Temple stood, their thoughts were of Jerusalem, and an early return in triumph.

In the meantime, they organized temporary communities, and administered them according to their ancient law. Desperately they clung to the old faith. Although bewildered by the march of events, they endeavored to preserve the fundamental elements and distinctive signs of the Hebrew religion. The struggle was difficult, and many were lost in the crowd, but a steadfast band of believers succeeded in retaining its identity in the midst of an alien population.

In this situation Ezekiel heard the call to become a prophet. Ezekiel lived in his own house among the exiles, near a canal called Chebar. One day the heavens were opened, and he saw visions of God. In the north there ap-

peared a fiery storm cloud, out of which came four living creatures (ch. 1: 4-28): terrifying many-headed flaming things with wings and wheels full of eyes, their wings making a sound as of marching armies. Above these creatures was the sky; and above the sky a throne made entirely of sapphire; and on the throne "a likeness as the appearance of a man," all one sheet of flame, ringed about by a vast rainbow. "This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord."

Ezekiel could not endure the sight, and fell to the ground in terror. Out of the flame came a voice: "Son of man, stand upon thy feet. . . . I send thee to the children of Israel." No prospect of success was held out to him as God's spokesman to a "rebellious, impudent, stiff-hearted" people. They would be briars, thorns, and scorpions to him; but he would be like flint against them. As God spoke, Ezekiel was given a scroll, "full of lamentations, mourning and woe." * At God's command he ate it, and it was as sweet as honey.

The central theme of the vision is the absolute and universal sovereignty of God. He is the great King of heaven and earth. His word is law, his will is done, his purposes are fulfilled, his judgments are executed with irresistible power. Man's highest privilege, as well as his sternest duty, is humbly to worship his God with adoration and praise, even as the angels of heaven, who hide their faces in the presence of the glory of God.

In describing the vision to his people Ezekiel emphasized the fact that the Lord was no far-off deity. He had appeared to the prophet on the banks of the Chebar in pagan Babylon. He appeared as a living person, in "the likeness as the appearance of a man" (ch. 1: 26). He could understand men, appreciate their motives, share their joy and woe. He also spoke a language and moved in a way that they could comprehend. He was a jealous God, whose feelings were roused

when his people worshiped foreign gods and idols. Yet he pitied the outcast infant, Israel. "When I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, then I said to you, 'Live! . . . Live and grow like a plant of the field'"* (ch. 16: 6, 7). He called the little children sacrificed to idols, "my children" (ch. 16: 21). He had compassion on the sheep of his flock who wandered among the hills; he would seek out the lost, and he would bring back those that were driven away, he would bind up the wounded, and he would strengthen the sick (ch. 34: 16). He had no pleasure in the death of the wicked. His will was that men should live. To the exiles these were reassuring words. One of the most distressing features of the exile had been the sense of being alone in a strange land, deserted by their God.

ACTING OUT A SERMON

In the blazing sun by the canal bank, Ezekiel set up a flat piece of tile with a map of Jerusalem scratched on it. Curious exiles, gathering around, would recognize it: "There's the Temple! That's the street where we lived!" Ezekiel lay on his side in front of the make-believe city, building earthworks and siege towers in the sand, and eating only such coarse and scanty rations as a besieged city might have.

Soon after, Ezekiel was instructed to deliver another sermon-in-signs. It was contrary to Israelite custom for a man to shave his beard, but Ezekiel did it; he shaved his beard in public with a sharp knife. When the crowd of the curious had seen him do this, the young prophet carefully weighed the hair and divided it into three parts. Then he burned one, chopped up another with the knife, and let the wind scatter the rest. Just a few hairs were left; these he carefully sewed into the hem of his robe. "That is Judah for you!" he said. "Your 'invincible' fellow countrymen back there, who are going to conquer Nebuchadnezzar! A third

of them will die by the sword, a third will perish in famine, a third will be scattered to the winds. But God will save a remnant." Ezekiel, like other prophets, brought this note of hope-in-despair to his exiled neighbors. God's purpose never fails; even if most of his people have to be destroyed, there will always be a faithful few who are the seed of the future.

HORROR IN THE HOLY PLACE

It was not only to the Israelites in exile that Ezekiel was to speak. God commissioned him also to return to Jerusalem, where the remnant of the people had raised up a new and stubborn aristocracy. These were now pursuing the same foolish policy that had led to the former conquest of Judah and the exile of 597 B.C.

One September day six years before Jerusalem fell, God picked up Ezekiel by the hair of his head and carried him some five hundred miles across the desert to Jerusalem. At least that is how Ezekiel reported it (ch. 8: 3). Perhaps it was a trance; perhaps this is a poetic description of an actual journey. At all events, in a dream state or in the flesh, Ezekiel found himself inside the Temple at Jerusalem. And in a secret chamber there, in this very Temple on which the Israelites so proudly relied to save them from all harm, Ezekiel saw seventy leaders of the nation, actually burning incense to pictures on the wall—pictures of "creeping things, and abominable beasts." In another part of the Temple, between the porch and the altar itself, were about twenty-five men, their backs to the Temple, bowing in worship to the rising sun. And at another gate there was a gathering of women, wailing for Tammuz, an ancient nature god.

Seeing such things going on, Ezekiel knew that God would not spare the city for the sake of the Temple. The Temple had become a center of evil. Instead of protecting the nation, it would surely draw down the wrath of God.

From that time on, Ezekiel constantly hammered out the same words: Jerusalem must be destroyed. The drama unfolded as a courtroom scene with Judah on trial for her life. Ezekiel, as prosecuting attorney, presented the divine indictment: Judah has rebelled against God. Her great sin is the abandonment of the true worship of God for the worship of false gods. This has found expression in a multitude of evil practices and deeds, which the prophet describes at length: the desecration of the Temple through pagan rites, violation of the Sabbath and other fundamental laws of Israel; throughout the city, greed and covetousness, commercial dishonesty and corruption; oppressive treatment of the alien resident, the widow, and the orphan.

Ezekiel closed his case with the allegory of the two sisters, Oholah and Oholibah (ch. 23). The nation was found guilty, and sentenced, like these adulterous and murderous women, to execution. The date had been set. It was close at hand. Ezekiel announced the approaching judgment in a variety of ways. He proclaimed it directly to the people; he described it in allegories and parables; he foresaw the calamity in visions; he portrayed the decisive event in symbolic actions. In all these the message was the same. Judgment would come upon the nation. The city would be destroyed, the Temple razed, and the people scattered.

THE MISSION TO THE EXILES

The fall of Jerusalem was a turning point in the history of Judah. The news of it had a shattering effect upon the exiles. They had entertained high hopes of a speedy return to their native land, and waited only for the collapse of the Babylonian Empire. Contrary to expectations, the empire stood firm and Judah collapsed. This was the end of hope. What point would there be now in maintaining their religion, in praying to God, in observing the law? God had

deserted his people. They could never return to the land. Utter despair seized them.

Ezekiel reacted in an entirely different way. There was a radical change in his teaching. He no longer faced the rebellious house of Israel, but rather a confused and depressed group of exiles. For the present the nation was dead. Until it was miraculously revived by the Lord, only individual Jews remained. In these lay the hope of restoration, and it was to them that the oracles of God were addressed. Ezekiel was appointed as their spiritual adviser, pastor rather than a prophet—"a watchman unto the house of Israel." He was responsible for the souls of all. He was enjoined, under pain of judgment, to warn "the wicked of his way to turn from it" (ch. 33: 9), and "the righteous man, that the righteous sin not" (ch. 3: 21).

For the exiles, Ezekiel had a new message of comfort and hope. In his thought they constituted the holy remnant, all that was left of the chosen people. Not only would God preserve them in this alien land, but he would prosper their efforts. In the latter days he would bring them back to the land of their fathers, re-establish them as the new Israel. For the people of the Captivity, Ezekiel had great sympathy and a lively personal interest in their well-being. When he condemned the sins of Jerusalem, his purpose was to vindicate the justice of God in destroying the city. It was too late for repentance. But he reproved the exiles gently. Their sins were not the bloody, ineradicable sins of Judah, summed up in the words "idolatry" and "murder," but rather the lesser iniquities of omission. They were neglecting the things of God for more worldly pursuits. They were more interested in their own selfish gain. Ezekiel criticized, but his purpose was correction. He was not interested merely in judgment, but in a change of ways.

IS GOD JUST?

The problem of God's justice in the regulation of human affairs was raised in an acute form by the destruction of Jerusalem. Both Ezekiel and the exiles agreed that the catastrophe constituted God's judgment upon Israel. The exiles maintained that God had showed himself neither just nor merciful in this. They argued that he ought to have spared the city for the sake of the righteous people in it. Had he not promised to spare Sodom, that cesspool of iniquity, if only ten good men were to be found in it (Gen. 18: 20-33)? Surely in the case of Jerusalem, the innocent were being punished for the sins of the unrighteous.

In replying to these objections, Ezekiel propounded the important doctrine that every man was responsible before God for his own sin. According to his belief, every man received of the Lord his just due. If a man were righteous, he would surely live; but the soul that sinned, it would die (ch. 18: 4). If this were true, then neither objection could be sustained. The presence of righteous men in Jerusalem meant nothing for the city as a whole. Each man was judged upon his own deserts. Therefore the merits of the saints could not be applied to the sinners. Even if those three famous men of God—Noah, Daniel, and Job—had been living in the city, "they would save neither sons nor daughters—they would save but themselves alone" * (Ezek. 14: 14, 16). The people in Jerusalem were judged for their own sins, and they deserved the destruction that came.

The exiles argued further that God had forsaken the land and rejected Israel. He was no longer concerned with the plight of the Jews. Thus they reasoned, and thus they lamented, "Our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we pine away in them; how then shall we live?" * (ch. 33:

10). To Ezekiel this was not true. God was still the God of Israel. If he had judged them for their sins, he would yet restore them for the honor of his name. The way to life was still open if only they would take it.

Those who accepted God's offer of salvation would constitute the core of the new Israel. In order to maintain their purity before the Lord they must conform to certain rules of conduct. As is the case with Jewish law in general, Ezekiel makes no distinction between moral and ritual transgressions. All are to be equally avoided. The ideal is to walk in the statutes of God and keep his ordinances.

There is no conflict between Ezekiel's teaching on the individual and his hope for a national restoration. On the contrary this concern both with the individual and with society is one of the distinctive features of Biblical religion. His ministry among the exiles had as its aim the rebirth of the nation. The training of individuals for the service of God was at once prelude and preparation.

Ezekiel thought of four stages in the process of redemption: restoration from exile; purification and the gift of a new spirit; renewal of the land; repentance. The order is remarkable. That repentance is reserved to the end seems peculiar, but that is actually evidence of the prophet's rare insight into the ways of God and man. For it is the goodness of God, not his judgment, which leads to repentance (see Rom. 2: 4). The enjoyment of unmerited blessings causes men to loathe their iniquities; not suffering, however greatly deserved. Salvation quickens the conscience, not condemnation.

This is the high point of Ezekiel's teaching. Here he most closely approaches the unknown prophet of the Exile (Second Isaiah), and the message of the Gospel. He expresses the ultimate hope of Israel in language worthy of either:

"I will take you out of the nations, and I will gather you from all the lands, and I will bring you to your own land. And I will sprinkle upon you clean water, and you shall be clean. . . . And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you: and I will take away the heart of stone from your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and I will make you walk in accordance with my statutes, and keep my judgments. . . . You shall dwell in the land which I gave your fathers; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. . . . Then you shall remember your evil ways, and your deeds which were not good, and you shall loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominations. . . . Therefore be ashamed and confounded for your ways, O house of Israel" * (ch. 36:24-32).

THE NEW JERUSALEM

As Ezekiel continued in his ministry he began to write down his prophecies. The people did not always welcome or understand his words. Yet the time was coming when they would know there had been a prophet in the midst of them, and his words would prove of the utmost value. Against that time Ezekiel recorded the words of the Lord.

The prophet's last work was his most important: the ground plan of the new Jerusalem. In this work, Ezekiel added to his prophecies of restoration and redemption a detailed plan for their realization. He dealt with all phases of the life of the people, centering, however, upon the worship of God in the Temple. There were intricate plans for the Temple. Careful instructions for the priests, the prince, and the people were designed to safeguard the sanctuary from any conceivable pollution. Other laws pointed the way to social and economic health for the community. Ezekiel's goal was a stable society. Only a community undisturbed by violent fluctuations and upheavals could adequately serve the Lord.

When this last work was done, Ezekiel retired from his labors. Of his last years and his death there is no record. According to tradition, he died a martyr, at the hands of the people he had served as watchman and pastor all his life.

He does not entirely disappear from view, however. A small group of congenial spirits had gathered around the venerable priest and prophet. To them he was no singer of songs (ch. 33: 30-33) but a true prophet of the Lord. They listened eagerly to his words, and avidly studied his writings. They and others who came after them re-edited the whole and rearranged the parts; but always, whatever changes they made, they were aware of the worth of this book and how important it was that it should be preserved for posterity. More than this, they applied his teachings. They based their work on his, adapting his principles to current problems, modifying his ideas in the light of experience. They discarded what they could not use, developed what they could.

In the end they formulated a remarkably effective program for the restored community of Israel. Though the Temple, when it was rebuilt, was to be only a pallid reflection of the glorious abode of the Lord in Ezekiel's vision, and though the new community hardly corresponded to a redeemed Israel, the motivating spirit was the same. The priestly plan centered the life of the nation about the Temple, and all the varied activities of the people were carried on under the direction of God. Not Isaiah, nor Jeremiah, nor even the great unknown prophet of the Exile, but Ezekiel the priest was the guiding spirit of the return.

At the root of the tangled complexity of Ezekiel's person and work, there was a single overpowering compulsion: zeal for the greater glory of God. The hammer blows of history, the impact of catastrophic events, affected him deeply, but he never wavered in his devotion to God. That

remained the same throughout, and completely dominated his life and personality in all its aspects.

HOW TO READ EZEKIEL. Much of Ezekiel is admitted to be obscure. The reader may begin with Ezekiel's call (chs. 1 to 3), and his symbolic sermons on Jerusalem's fall (chs. 4; 5); the parable of the eagles and the vine (ch. 17) with Ezekiel's own interpretation; the principle of personal responsibility (ch. 18); Ezekiel's wife's death, and his sermon about it (ch. 24: 15-24); a lamentation for Tyre, containing some of the most beautiful and eloquent passages in the book, and incidentally a fine description of the wealth of an ancient city (chs. 27; 28); the new heart (ch. 36: 22-28); the valley of dry bones (ch. 37).

~~~~~ CHAPTER 17 ~~~~

## Daniel

DANIEL and his three young companions are heroes of faith. The unwavering trust of these men in God forms the theme of a series of exciting stories in which their adventures are described. Attacked by their enemies, they hold fast to their faith and ultimately triumph through the goodness and power of God.

As the story unfolds we see how, after the conquest of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, Daniel and his friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, were carried off into exile. In Babylon, the four noble youths attracted the eye of the king, and were placed under his protection. They were fed from the royal kitchens, and along with the sons of Babylonian lords, received special training from royal scholars. When they had successfully completed the course of instruction, they were chosen by the king to be his personal attendants.

This stirred up the envy and hatred of the court officials. They were enraged to see such high honors bestowed upon foreigners, and thereafter plotted against the four friends, seeking by any means to discredit them before the king.

### DANIEL'S PROMOTION

The king, Nebuchadnezzar, had a dream, and was anxious to learn the meaning of it. He called together his ministers and courtiers and wise men, and asked them to give him the interpretation of the dream. But he refused to tell them the

content of the vision, saying that if they were truly wise, they would be able to divine the content and then explain its significance. This they declared was impossible; whereupon the king ordered them all to be executed.

When Daniel heard of it, he hastened to the king. He offered to solve the problem, desiring as his reward only that the wise men be set free. Then Daniel returned to his friends, and the four bowed themselves in prayer before God. In a vision in the night the secret was revealed to Daniel. Having blessed God for his goodness, Daniel went before the king, described his vision in detail, and then interpreted its meaning.

As a reward, Daniel was made governor of the province of Babylon, and his friends also were promoted to positions of authority. Yet although he had saved his enemies, they showed no gratitude, but continued to hate him and his friends and plot against their lives.

#### "OUR GOD . . . IS ABLE"

At the earliest opportunity, they trumped up charges against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego. Nebuchadnezzar had erected a golden image, and decreed that at stated times all people must fall down before it, on pain of death. The three Jews, however, following the faith of their fathers, could not bow down before any image, but continued daily in the worship of the only true, living God. Their enemies informed against them, telling the king that his favorites were openly violating his edict. Then, according to the royal decree, they were seized and thrown into a blazing furnace. While the king watched, he saw the three walking about in the flames, and among them a fourth, a godlike being. Then the king knew that their God was with them—that wherever he himself might thrust them, whatever he might do to punish them, their God would find them and save them. So the

king opened the door of the furnace, and the three came forth unharmed.

Each new adventure brought them to the edge of doom. Yet the unswerving conviction that their God was with them, the knowledge that they had kept faith with him, sustained them. And each time they were delivered from the evil that menaced them.

#### APOCALYPTIC

The Book of Daniel is but one of many examples of a type of literature that appeared among the Jews after the third century B.C. The name given to it is "Apocalypse." This is from a Greek word meaning "to withdraw a veil." Books of this kind had as their aim an unveiling of the future in order to show that God's will would eventually triumph over all who stood against it.

Apocalyptic literature, or apocalyptic for short, is "under-ground" literature; that is to say, it appeared in periods when the Jews were crushed under the heel of an oppressor. It is a "tract for the times," the message of which is that God has not forgotten his people, and will destroy their destroyers. Naturally such a message, if it fell into the hands of the government police, would sound like treason. If a Jewish author in the year 168 B.C. wrote openly that God was going to destroy the kingdom of Antiochus Epiphanes, who was ruling Palestine at the time, or in A.D. 100 that God would destroy the Roman Empire, such a writing would have been confiscated and those who possessed copies of it would have been severely punished.

If the police happened to find a copy of an apocalypse, they would not know what to make of it. They would regard it as harmless nonsense. It certainly would not read like the revolutionary tract that it was. The reader of such a work was not likely to be arrested, and neither was the author.

One characteristic of apocalyptic was that it never bore the author's name. It was always written as though it were by some man famous in Hebrew story, usually long since dead: Daniel, or Enoch, or the twelve sons of Jacob, or Baruch, or some other well-known character. This was not a device merely to save the real author from arrest. The writer was placing himself at an earlier point in history, and looking down the years in a longer perspective than would be possible from a contemporary standpoint.

Another characteristic of apocalyptic is its symbolism. We can see the beginnings of this in the prophets, notably in Ezekiel and Joel. In apocalyptic, everything is in a code, which we cannot always decipher. This is what makes it hard to understand in detail. But we can always see the main point, which is the triumph of God.

#### THE BACKGROUND OF DANIEL

The author of the heroic stories in The Book of Daniel was seeking to bring a message of hope to the victims of religious persecution. He and the people to whom he ministered were living in the second century B.C. They had seen kingdoms rise and fall, old nations disappear and new ones rise to power, and still they waited for the day when Israel would be restored. Assyria and Babylon had fallen. Alexander had conquered the world, but his empire had fallen apart at his death. His generals carved out four kingdoms, then fought among themselves over the borderlands. For a hundred years, Egypt under the Ptolemies controlled Palestine. Then in 200 B.C., Antiochus III, the king of Syria, defeated the Egyptians and took the little country as a prize in battle. The mild rule of the Ptolemies was replaced by the repressive dominion of the Seleucid kings. The day of release for the Jews seemed farther and farther away. In the reign of Antiochus IV, Epiphanes (175-163 B.C.),

there had begun for them a time of almost total despair.

Antiochus IV was an energetic empire builder, continually engaged in wars of conquest against his neighbors. To strengthen and unify his kingdom in the pursuit of his ambition, he attempted to impose a pagan state religion on all his subjects. In carrying out this program, he centered his attention on the Jews of Palestine, whose persistence in their own faith offered very serious obstacles. One of his first acts was to enter Jerusalem, massacre the worshipers in the Temple, and carry off the sacred vessels.

Many Jews fell away from the faith in those days, and went over to the side of Antiochus. But others held tenaciously to their beliefs, and refused to deny their God. The king redoubled his efforts to crush the Jews and wipe out their religion. He violated the sanctity of the Temple again, this time to set up an image of the god Jupiter in the Holy of Holies. As an added insult, he instituted the sacrifice of swine upon the altar to this idol.

For a final vengeful assault upon the city of Jerusalem, Antiochus selected the Sabbath. While the people were peacefully at worship, his soldiers swept into the city, murdering and pillaging. They tramped into the Temple, and sacked it. Worship services were halted, the sacred books of the Law were burned, and priests and people were thrown out of the sanctuary. On order of Antiochus, circumcision, the sign of the covenant with God, was prohibited; mothers who permitted their sons to be circumcised were put to death. Many Jews were sold into slavery; many fled in terror from the city.

In the midst of this catastrophe, when faith was being shaken by a brutal persecution, the writer of The Book of Daniel spoke. He addressed himself to those who doubted their God, to those who questioned his ways. From earliest times, the Israelites had believed that if they were faithful

and served God, they would be delivered from all evil and the wicked would receive the just punishment of their sins. Yet constantly their experience contradicted this view. On every side they saw evildoers rise to places of prominence, gain wealth and power at the expense of the innocent. Worse than this, they watched the pagan idolaters around them win victories and establish great empires while they, the holy people of God, suffered defeat, captivity, and servitude. Year after year, generation after generation, the same thing continued, until their faith seemed futile. Where was the God of justice and truth; where was the God of goodness and mercy? Why was evil perpetually on the throne? For as soon as one kingdom fell in its misdeeds, another more wicked than the last rose to take its place, and the never-ending cycle continued.

The author of The Book of Daniel affirmed that this cycle of evil would end. Because God is sovereign over all history, his will must triumph in the end. Seeking some way to offer his people this encouragement, the writer put himself in the place of Daniel, the wise statesman and seer of old. Looking through Daniel's eyes, he surveyed the history of the succeeding centuries in a series of visions (chs. 7 to 12 mainly). He explained that the apparently haphazard succession of kings and empires from the sixth to the second century was really part of the hidden plan of God. Through the seer, he proclaimed that now the end was at hand, that God would smash the kingdoms of the earth, and establish his own Kingdom, which would be eternal. In that day the people of all the ages would be summoned to judgment. The righteous would receive the blessings of God; but the wicked, the just punishment for their sins. Here for the first time in the Old Testament there is a clear assertion of the resurrection of the dead.

"And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness, as the stars for ever and ever" (ch. 12:2, 3).

This is the writer's answer, one that the Christian Church has made its own, to the problem of evil. Of what use, people might have asked the writer of Daniel, of what use is a triumph of God if we are not alive to share it? For in Antiochus' times people were no longer immune to flames or to lions; Antiochus' fires burned and his lions consumed their victims alive. The doctrine of the resurrection is Daniel's answer. Death does not end all. The enemy of God does not escape God's judgment by dying; the friend of God does not miss his reward by dying.

**HOW TO READ DANIEL.** Read through the first six chapters in order to get a full impression of the heroic faith of Daniel and his friends and to form an estimate of what such stories meant to faithful Israelites in time of persecution. Then examine more carefully Daniel's description of the king's dream in ch. 2: 31-45, to see how it depicts the various kingdoms from the time of Nebuchadnezzar on, ending with the promise of the coming of God's perfect Kingdom.

To interpret the visions in chs. 7 to 12 you will need the help of a good commentary. Interpretations that try to find in these chapters a description of events in the modern world are untrustworthy and lead the mind away from a right understanding of Daniel's faith in the sovereignty and the certain triumph of God.

## hosea : joel

**H**IN THE experience of his own unhappy life, the prophet Hosea learned the depth and constancy of God's love. What he learned he taught his people. The severity of God's punishment was an expression, not of any hatred for men, but of his love for them. God cannot let them destroy themselves without first pleading with them and then, through chastisement, trying to recall them from their evil ways.

Hosea knew these things on a very human level in his own experience. He had fallen in love and married Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim. He soon learned that Gomer was unfaithful to him. After their third child was born, she left Hosea to go and live with one of her lovers. The prophet, angry and hurt, felt there was nothing to do but to cast her out of his life. In his bewilderment he turned to God. Why, he asked, had this happened to him? Why had God led him to marry an adulterous woman?

Pondering these circumstances, Hosea began to recognize a parallel between his life with Gomer and Israel's history under God. The nation God had chosen and loved had gone astray, following strange gods, worshiping idols of silver and gold. Like an unfaithful wife, Israel had turned away from God, and played the harlot with the false gods of her neighbors. The prophet now saw his own unhappy experience in a new light. His life with Gomer was a parable of the history and fate of Israel. In it he could see, as in a

mirror, what God was to Israel and how Israel's conduct must appear to God. As he had loved Gomer, so God had loved Israel. As Gomer had strayed, so Israel was unfaithful. As the false wife must be punished, so Israel was to be chastised and cast off. But when Israel repented, then God would forgive his people, and receive them with rejoicing.

So it was with Gomer. When her lovers forsook her, she turned to Hosea for help. In a tender and compassionate scene, Hosea forgave his wife, and took her back. He paid the debts she had incurred, and renewed their marriage covenant. Yet, because she had sinned, he did not immediately bring her into his home. He set her apart, and kept her secluded for many days, a gentle punishment to remind her of what she had done.

#### A PREACHER OF JUSTICE AND LOVE

The prophet's work among the Israelites had only begun. Once God had shown him the hidden meaning and wider implications of his family life, the prophet knew that he must go and tell the people what he had learned. A brave decision was required, for in delivering his message he would have to reveal the shameful secrets of his private life. Many would fail to grasp the significance of his message. Instead of understanding the parable of an unfaithful Israel, instead of acknowledging the plea for repentance and reform, they would mock him, jeer at an unhappy husband admitting to the world that his wife was unfaithful.

The fate of Israel was symbolized in the names of Hosea's children. The name of the first, "Jezreel," suggested war, for the valley of Jezreel was more than once a battlefield. The second child was called, "Lo-ruhamah," "She who is not pitied"; and the third was named, "Lo-ammi," "Not my people." These were harsh phrases for a loving God to speak. But this was not the full message. Hosea sought to

show the people, not only the unhappy punishments they would suffer, but the possibilities for restoration which lay beyond. Hosea pointed out that they must first see God's anger and bear his stripes. Then, when they had experienced the wrath of God and felt the terror and loneliness of separation from him, they would repent and seek his forgiveness on their knees. Hosea assured them that as he had taken back his repentant wife, so God would restore his repentant people. In that day, God would take pity upon those who were not pitied; and to those who were called "Not my people," he would say, "My people."

Hosea's prophecies were not always gentle messages of love and forgiveness. He singled out the priests as the arch-villains of Israel's woe. They, the leaders and teachers of the people, had rejected knowledge. They did not teach their people the truth concerning God and his ways. The people remained in ignorance and could not distinguish between right and wrong, between the living God and lifeless idols. Because the priests had denied their God, he would deny them. Because they had debauched themselves with drunkenness and immorality, they and the foolish people who imitated them would be destroyed.

The princes and nobles were also guilty of wrongdoing. They had staked Israel's future on a series of alliances with foreign nations. By turning to Egypt or Assyria, or organizing a confederation with the little states on their borders, they hoped to secure Israel's sovereignty. Hosea warned that it was foolhardy to put trust in these foreigners. Israel's fate, he said, was in the hands of the Lord, and the leaders of the nation should turn to him for help. Let them not delay until a crisis developed, but turn now in repentance and faith, and perhaps he would save them from disaster. Apart from God, there was no security. He was their only hope.

Constantly Hosea urged the people to repent before the

punishment of God fell upon them. In a beautiful and moving passage he described the relationship between God and Israel in earlier times:

“When Israel was a child, then I loved him,  
And called my son out of Egypt. . . .  
It was I that taught Ephraim to walk,  
Taking them in my arms; . . . with the cords  
of a man I drew them,  
With bands of love” \* (ch. 11:1-4).

Those days had long passed, and now God was about to abandon his people to the enemy. They would not return to Egypt as slaves, but would be conquered by the barbaric Assyrians. This was the divine decree, and so it must come to pass. But the thought of sacrificing his children disturbed the heart of God. The prophet eloquently portrays the sorrow and anguish of God, the mixed feelings of pity and wrath.

“My heart is turned in upon me,  
My feelings are kindled together” \* (ch. 11:8).

For God loved them while he punished them; and he punished them because he loved them.

Thus the prophet's mission, begun about 745 B.C., moved toward its fulfillment. Hosea had brought the message of the Lord; he had interpreted it through events in his own life. When he had done this, however, he could not abandon Israel. He remained with his people until the day of disaster. Although it was too late, he did not cease to plead with them, hopelessly, but with wonderful love:

“O Israel, return unto the Lord your God;  
For you have stumbled in your wickedness.  
Take with you words, and return to the Lord:  
Say unto him, Forgive iniquity” \* (ch. 14:1, 2).

The prophet's pleadings went unnoticed. The greater their need of God became, the less willing the people were to ask his help. At last in 722-721 B.C. the judgment fell. As the prophet had foreseen, the Assyrian hordes swept down on Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom, and destroyed it. The country was devastated, its people carried off into captivity.

**HOW TO READ HOSEA.** The first and third chapters are Hosea's story. Chapters 2 and 4 to 14 contain Hosea's message based on that story.

Notable passages are chs. 2: 14-23; 4: 1-9; 6: 1-11; 7: 11: 1-11; 14.

#### THE BOOK OF JOEL

A plague of locusts swept across the land of Judah. The hungry marauders devastated the country, stripping the fields and the orchards bare, eating even the bark of the trees. In their wake came plague, and famine, and death. The prophet Joel portrayed the stricken nation in mourning: the Temple shrouded in gloom, deserted by the people no longer able to bring meal and drink offerings; the farmer, the vinedresser, and the shepherd, all ruined in the same disaster; and the drunkard weeping because there was no wine; all living things, man and beast, crying out to God in their distress.

#### THE DAY OF THE LORD

For the prophet the catastrophe was also a sign, a portent of that which was to come—the great and terrible day of the Lord. The day of the Lord did not stand in the normal sequence of days and years, but was an eternal event hanging over the world of men, ready to break in upon them at any time. So every catastrophe that struck, drought or hurricane, famine or plague, earthquake, flood, war, was a sign

of the final cataclysm. Each was a reminder from God to the world that it should repent and prepare for his coming.

This day of the Lord was long and confidently awaited by the people of Judah. They expected it to be a day of victory and rejoicing for them, when God would appear upon the earth with his heavenly hosts. He would destroy their enemies, restore them, his chosen ones, to their rightful possessions, and establish his rule over them forever and ever.

The prophet, however, contradicted their hopes. The judgment, he proclaimed, would fall equally on all peoples. The wicked would be punished for their evil deeds; the righteous would be vindicated by the avenging wrath of God. Nor would Judah escape the final reckoning. Its preferred position before God brought with it, not greater honor, but greater responsibility. Therefore, the penalty for failure would be more severe. Whether the last day were immediately at hand, or centuries in coming, the people of God could never be exempt from his judgment. Let all beware of an easy optimism with regard to the coming of the Lord.

At the same time, Joel's prophecy was more than a warning of the terror to come. It was a message of hope. It was his mission to call his people to repentance, to tell them that, if they so willed, they might be saved in the day of wrath. Let them forsake their sins, let them bow their guilty heads before God and confess the evil in their hearts, and he would forgive. In place of the recent calamities there would be evidence of his good will toward his people, and the promise of future blessings. For their suffering they would be doubly compensated. The ravaged land would be restored. The wasted fields would yield bumper crops, and the orchards would produce fine fruit in abundance. There would be food for all, enough and to spare. The permanent prosperity to come would more than make up for the starvation the

locusts had brought. Then Israel would live happily and at peace.

Still greater blessings were in store. In days to come the faithful ones would receive the gift of God's Holy Spirit. Through the working of his Spirit in their hearts, God would transform their inner lives, even as he had restored their outer circumstances. Every soul would be led to higher and higher levels of faith, to new and closer relations with God himself. Joel's words, deeply impressed in the memory of his hearers and recorded by his followers, carried across the centuries to the first Christians at Pentecost (Acts, ch. 2), and are still heard with reverence today.

#### PETER GIVES A LESSON IN INTERPRETATION

On the Day of Pentecost, when the little group of early Christians had that memorable and almost indescribable experience of whirlwind and flame, and began to "speak with tongues," Peter, who knew his Old Testament, told the astonished crowds, "This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel"—this is the outpouring of the Spirit that he foretold. Peter knew how to get at the heart of these seemingly fantastic prophecies. Joel (ch. 2: 28-32) speaks of "blood, and fire, and pillars of smoke"—the sun turned into darkness and the moon into blood. The sun and moon, however, were quite as usual on the Day of Pentecost. Peter does not think of taking Joel as if it were literal prose. What concerns Peter is Joel's announcement of the coming of God. Peter goes beneath the poetry to the truth that the poetry expresses. And in so doing, he gives us a clue for interpreting all the prophets.

#### A DAY OF DECISION

Joel delivered a message of warning, a threat of destruction, a hope of restoration. He interpreted the signs of the

times for his people, storm signals which heralded the day of judgment. Every day was a day of choice; with every act the final accounting was being decided. Confronting every man was the challenge of God, demanding allegiance to him, a response in devotion and loyalty to his love as well as to his laws. These signs Joel saw in a plague of locusts. As long as there are signs in the earth, and other tokens of divine displeasure, then the judgment is impending, and his words have meaning.

The Book of Joel offers little information about the prophet, or the place and time of the prophecy. It may have been written at any time between 538 and 350 B.C. The circumstances described seem to fit most naturally the early days of the return from the Exile in 538 B.C. under Zerubbabel (Ezra, ch. 1). For a long period the Jews were few in number, concentrated mainly around Jerusalem. We see in the book a small impoverished community, surrounded by enemies. A locust plague would be a major disaster, threatening the existence of the state. Joel lived and suffered with his people, but he saw things differently. While they were immersed in the troubles of the day, he warned of a more subtle, more fundamental, more immediate danger—the judgment of God.

#### HOW TO READ JOEL.

Ch. 1. A call to repentance when the land is stripped bare by locusts.

Ch. 2: 1-17. A second call to repentance in which the onrush of the locusts is likened to an invading army.

Ch. 2: 18-32. The repentance of the people calls forth from the prophet a promise of better days.

Ch. 3. A description of God's judgment upon the nation.

## AMOS : OBADIAH

**A**MOS is the first of the prophets whose writings have been preserved. His entire message is a unit, and may have been delivered in a one- or two-day period about 750 B.C. It is not difficult, from our knowledge of ancient festivals in Israel, to re-create the scene in the midst of which Amos first appeared at Beth-el. You can see in your mind's eye the holiday crowds gathered at the great sanctuary celebrating an annual feast.

The streets of Beth-el were crowded. There were fishermen from Galilee and shepherds from the southern hills. Vine growers from the Mount Carmel region exchanged greetings with merchants of the capital city, Samaria. Seamen of Dor on the Mediterranean coast rubbed elbows with traders from beyond the Jordan. And these were only a small part of the crowd that pushed toward the shrine just outside Beth-el. The rich came with great retinues—princes of the royal house and nobles of the court, accompanied by multitudes of servants, followed by pack trains of heavy-laden asses bearing rich gifts to the sanctuary. Wealthy villagers came, leading prized animals; and artisans, with money to buy sacrifices. The poor came too, bringing what they could; and the beggars, carrying nothing.

The ceremonies had already begun. Amaziah, the chief priest, presided over the elaborate ritual. The choir of lesser priests chanted to the music of flute and lyre. Whole

burnt offerings lay smoking on the altar. People filled the open court, gathered in solemn assembly before the Lord, to worship, to offer praise and sacrifice, to feast in his presence.

As the day wore on and the procession of sacrifices came to an end, the solemn religious feast turned into a wild, sensual celebration. The poor took what their poverty could provide, while the rich ate and drank of their abundance. Drunkenness and lust were mixed into the framework of worship on the very steps of the altar. The people paid homage to their God in an orgy of excess. Then suddenly, in the midst of this evil, a man stepped forward. His dress was rough and simple—the rude skins and dark woolens of a sheepherder. His face was stern, and his voice rang with authority as he cried out:

“The Lord roars from Zion,  
And from Jerusalem he thunders;  
And the pastures of the shepherds shall mourn,  
And the top of Carmel shall wither”\* (ch. 1: 2).

The words of judgment echoed through the court, pierced the dull ears of the merrymakers. Roused from their drunken stupor, they silently listened to a warning that a day of judgment was approaching. The nations had violated the basic moral laws of the world, and for their transgressions they would be punished. Because of its brutal and barbaric cruelty in warfare, the kingdom of Syria, with its capital at Damascus, would be destroyed and its people led away into captivity. Then the prophet spoke of the Philistines at Gaza, and the Phoenicians at Tyre, who had been guilty of slave trading with Edom. These also would not escape destruction. Each of Israel’s neighbors was brought under the scrutiny of God, and each was found guilty. Punishment, decisive and irreversible, was promised.

The crowd began to relax. They had feared that this

rough peasant would create trouble with his ill-omened words of Carmel and Jerusalem. But see, he spoke with a silver tongue, and his words were wise and just. It was well known that these neighboring countries were evil in the sight of God. With each pronouncement of just punishment, the murmurs of approval grew. The shepherd would be well rewarded for this bit of prophesying. They were ready with applause and money as he approached the climax.

Then, fixing his eyes upon the worshipers in the court of the sanctuary, his voice loud with anger, firm with decision, Amos spoke:

"For three transgressions of *Israel*,  
Yea, for four, I will not reverse it" \* (ch. 2: 6).

Applause died on their lips. The crowd grew uneasy.

"Because they sell the righteous for silver,  
And the poor for a pair of sandals" \* (ch. 2:6).

"And upon clothes that are pledged  
They stretch out beside every altar,  
And the wine of those that are fined  
They drink in the house of their God" \*  
(ch. 2: 8).

Ignoring the angry murmurs of the crowd, Amos continued to speak. Relentlessly he listed Israel's sins, and called down God's judgment upon the guilty nation.

The multitude surged to their feet. They cried: "Traitor!" "Stone him!" Amos stood silently before the people waiting for the noise to subside. A man stepped up beside him and gestured for attention. To the angry mob he said:

"There is no need to disturb yourselves over this fool. Israel is at the height of its prosperity. Never have so many been so rich. Our armies are victorious; the people flourish. We are the chosen of God. How could he condemn his own? As for you, O prophet, go prophesy to Edom and Moab, for these people have need of such warnings."

Amos answered him:

"Hear this word which the Lord has spoken against you,  
O children of Israel. . . .

"You only have I known of all the tribes of the  
earth:

Therefore I will visit upon you all your iniqui-  
ties" \* (ch. 3:1, 2).

This was no mystery, he added, but simple justice. Since Israel had received more from God than the other nations, more was to be required of Israel. As long as the people were faithful to the covenant, God would be with them, and would make them great among the nations. But when they transgressed, the punishment would be heavier than for the other nations, because they were the chosen of God.

Had not God already given Israel ample warning of the disaster that threatened? He had brought on them a series of natural calamities, beginning with famine and drought, and now in the last days an earthquake. But Israel did not understand these signs; Israel did not return to the Lord. The prophet offered this last word:

"Prepare to meet thy God, O Israel.  
For, behold, the Former of the mountains,  
And the Creator of the wind, . . .  
The Maker of the morning and darkness,  
And He who treads upon the high places of the  
earth,  
The Lord, the God of hosts, is his name" \*  
(ch. 4: 12, 13).

When he had finished speaking, Amos passed through their midst, and no man dared to stop him.

#### THE MESSAGE OF THE VISIONS

Word of the incident traveled swiftly, and the next day a huge crowd gathered at the sanctuary. Amaziah, the chief

priest, was waiting impatiently at the foot of the altar, with a small group of officials. Before long, Amos appeared. As Amaziah walked toward him, the prophet began to speak, "Thus the Lord God showed me." \* He described a vision of locusts devouring the grass of the land. He pleaded with God for his people: "How shall Jacob stand? for he is small" \* (ch. 7: 2). The Lord relented, and caused the plague to cease.

In a second vision, he saw a great fire consume the sea, and then approach the land. Again he prayed for his people, and again God relented and put an end to the danger.

Twice the prophet had interceded for Israel. Twice the Lord had relented and stayed the catastrophe. The people were puzzled. What new side of the prophet was this? Was he concerned with the fate of Israel, after all? Or was he simply trying to avoid trouble with the authorities? A fat merchant of Samaria spoke up:

"Yesterday, he proclaimed doom and destruction for Israel; but today he has saved our land. A most excellent and acceptable prophet; his reputation, if he has one, is unimpaired, and we are none the worse for the ordeal."

Laughter tittered through the crowd.

The prophet's face was impassive. Gravely he described a third vision. The Lord stood beside a wall with a plumb line in his hand. And he said,

"I have set a plumb line in the midst of my people  
Israel:

I will never pardon them again:  
The high places of Isaac shall be desolate,  
And the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste;  
And I will rise against the house of Jeroboam  
with the sword" \* (ch. 7:8, 9).

The laughter ceased abruptly. The mention of the king, Jeroboam II, had an electric effect on the crowd. Their

worst suspicions were confirmed: the man was a revolutionary and a traitor. Amaziah pointed an accusing finger at Amos, and, in a high, angry voice, said to the priest at his side:

"Go, bring word to Jeroboam, king of Israel, and say: 'Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel. This is what he said, "Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel shall surely go into captivity'"'"\* (ch. 7:10, 11).

Then Amaziah lashed out at Amos:

"O seer, go, flee to the land of Judah, eat bread there, and prophesy there: but never prophesy again at Beth-el: for it is the king's sanctuary, and a royal palace" \* (ch. 7:12, 13).

Amos stepped down between the priest and his followers and the menacing mob. He thought of his present danger, and of his past life, his home in Tekoa. He had been a happy, peaceful shepherd. But the Lord had laid his hand on him, and given him a message. When the Lord God has spoken, what can a man do but prophesy? He spoke slowly and carefully:

"I am not a prophet, nor am I a prophet's son. But I am a shepherd . . . and the Lord took me from after the flock. And the Lord said to me, 'Go prophesy to my people Israel.'

You say, 'You shall not prophesy against Israel.'

Therefore the Lord has said:

' . . . Your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword. . . .

You shall die in an unclean land,

And Israel shall surely go into captivity'" \* (ch. 7. 14-17).

Amos had not quite finished. Disregarding the chief priest, his assistants, and the mob, he calmly went on with

what he had to say. He told of his vision of a basket of summer fruit. This, he knew, symbolized the end that would come to the people of Israel. They would fall, never to rise again. The last vision of which he spoke was of the sanctuary itself, and portrayed the total destruction of the building, the priests, and the people.

Then the prophet turned his back on Amaziah and the others, and went his way. The message of the Lord had been delivered.

Some in the crowd, among the poorest of the city, followed after him. They stopped him along the road, and said to him: "We know that you are a prophet sent from God, and that you are no respecter of persons, but speak the truth at all times. Tell us, is there no good word from the Lord? We have heard your words of judgment. But is there no word of comfort; have you no word of hope?"

The prophet looked at them thoughtfully.

"You know the judgment of God cannot be reversed. Israel must fall. God will shake the house of Israel as a man shakes a sieve. But only the sinners shall be dashed in pieces to the ground. The just shall live. They shall also be comforted. For in the last days, the Lord will raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen" \* (ch. 9:9-11).

Amos returned to his own land, and lived out his days as a herder of sheep, and a dresser of sycamore trees. Perhaps he lived to see the day when his prophecy of judgment was fulfilled. Within a generation, all happened as he had said. The house of Jeroboam was cut down by the sword. Jeroboam's son Zechariah was slain barely six months after ascending the throne. The country itself was overrun by the Assyrian hosts some twenty years later (722-721 B.C.). The temple at Beth-el was so completely destroyed that its exact site has never been found. The remnant of the people was carried away into captivity. The Kingdom of Israel fell, never to rise again.

**HOW TO READ AMOS.** Amos can be read straight through, as it is a series of addresses, or summaries of addresses, or sermons. The first is in chs. 1 and 2; the next in ch. 3; the third in chs. 4 to 6. Then follows a series of visions, in chs. 7: 1 to 9: 8, with the interlude of the Amaziah incident at ch. 7: 10-17. Chapter 9: 8b-15 is an epilogue.

Still another way to read Amos is to translate it into the present. Suppose Amos were preaching in your church next Sunday morning. Suppose we put "America" in place of "Israel," what would Amos have to say to our nation in this twentieth century? Reading in this way, you will find this book speaking, not an ancient language, but words as fresh as the morning news.

"Are you not the same as Africans to me, O Americans?" says the Lord. "I brought America up out of Europe of old; yes, and also the Germans from the times of the Roman invasions, and the Russians from their earliest days. The eyes of God are on all sinful nations; and whatever their name, the nations that cannot learn to live justly will be destroyed from off the face of the earth."

#### THE BOOK OF OBADIAH

From the days of the Exodus, Edom and Judah had been close neighbors and bitter foes. The homeless Israelites, peacefully seeking a way to their promised land, were turned back at Edom's borders and forced to detour around that country. Once the Israelites were established in Canaan, there was continual border warfare with the Edomites over the rich mining valley in the Arabah, south of the Dead Sea. Century after century the two nations fought for control of that strategic area. King David (1010-970 B.C.) defeated the Edomites decisively and not only annexed the Arabah, but conquered the whole of Edom as well. For a long time Edom remained part of the Kingdom of Judah, but after a

series of bloody rebellions it won its independence. Conflict between the two peoples continued until the last days of Judah when the Edomites joined in the final assault and destruction of Jerusalem.

Obadiah lived and spoke at some time in the century following 538 B.C. His attitude toward Edom was typical of all Judah. Edom was the traditional enemy, but Edom in an earlier time had been a brother nation. Both the kinship and the rivalry were traced back to the original brother enemies: Jacob (Israel) and Esau (Edom). Ever since, each nation had compiled a list of injuries received and wrongs suffered, and kept a ledger of old scores to be paid, debts of vengeance to be settled.

In the eyes of Judeans, Edom was the marauder, the attacker, Judah the innocent victim. They fully expected that when the day of judgment should come, God would destroy Edom and erase the Edomites from the memory of man; at the same time Judah would be restored to glory and given authority over all its enemies. The fact that Judah had attacked and conquered Edom, and sinned greatly against a neighbor, did not count in their reckoning. They were the chosen people of God, and any nation that fought against them blasphemed against him. Therefore God, in his justice, would punish such pagan idolaters. Vengeance on Edom was one of the great hopes of Judah.

#### OBADIAH'S MESSAGE

In his denunciation of Edom, Obadiah echoed the older prophets; similar prophecies of doom are to be found in Jer. 49: 7-22 and Ezek., ch. 35. Obadiah's brief message was a song of triumph over a fallen enemy. Unlike the other prophets, Obadiah did not temper his call for vengeance with an acknowledgment of Judah's guilt. For him, God was the personal avenger of Judah.

Obadiah failed to understand the broader meaning of the sovereignty of God, the wider implications of his justice and mercy. It was given to men with sharper eyes and deeper faith to see that the ultimate goal of Judah was not military triumph over its foes, but the spiritual conquest of the hearts of the people. Israel had a mission in the world. It was the task of Israel to bring the word of God to all the nations, and teach them of his ways, so that they would turn from their false gods and worship and serve only the God of Israel.

This was God's desire for Israel: that through his chosen people the nations of the world should be delivered from their sins and escape the wrath of judgment. In their salvation, in their reconciliation with God, Israel would be honored. In the final gathering of the peoples, when God established his Kingdom on earth, Israel would find its reward, ample restitution for all its suffering.

As long as the people of Judah called upon God for vengeance against their enemies, the door to true service was closed. As long as their hearts were locked in hate, they could not begin to fulfill their purpose. They had yet to learn and accept the truth, implicit in their covenant with God and stated in absolute terms centuries later by Jesus Christ:

"But I say unto you, Love your enemies, . . . and pray for them which . . . persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 5:44, 45).

**HOW TO READ OBADIAH.** This book can be read in very few minutes. It is important to keep in mind the background of relationships between Judah and Edom as you read.

## jonah : micah

THE prophet whose story is told in The Book of Jonah is not a very admirable man; indeed, nearly everyone else in the story shows up better than Jonah. In his attitudes and actions he is almost always in the wrong—a man who hardly belongs in the tradition of the great prophets. Nor does the book consist of a series of prophetic exhortations; it is a story ending with a question—a question which God asks, and which Jonah does not dare to answer.

Many modern readers fail to grasp the essential meaning of this book. They do not even hear the question that God asks of Jonah—and of them. Too often they are distracted by the episode of the great fish and the problem of whether a man could survive in its stomach for three days. As a result they miss the point of the whole story.

### THE PEOPLE FOR WHOM THE BOOK WAS WRITTEN

While the Israelites had known for centuries that they were the chosen people of God, few had ever considered the responsibilities involved in such a relationship. They were dumfounded at the fall of Jerusalem, and went away into exile amazed and bewildered at the way God had treated his own people. They returned from exile convinced that, having suffered their punishment, they would now see the downfall of all their enemies and the rise of a powerful king-

dom in Judah with dominion over the whole earth. They comforted themselves with the thought that on the day of judgment God would take vengeance for all the wrongs they had received and would punish all those who had attacked the holy nation.

While the people as a whole enjoyed this smug expectation, there were thinking men among them who were appalled at such an attitude. It expressed a complete misunderstanding of the nature of God, and a false interpretation of Israel's place in the divine plan. One of those who took seriously to heart this tragic distortion of Israel's mission was the author of The Book of Jonah. Like Second Isaiah, he recognized that Israel had been chosen by God to be a servant of the Most High, his messenger to the nations. It was Israel's mission to bring to the peoples of the earth the true knowledge of God. The Jews were not to be instruments of vengeance, settling old scores with ancient enemies, but bearers of God's salvation to those same enemies and to the rest of the world. Just as God loved all his creatures and did not desire the death of any man, so the Jews must learn to love their neighbors and former enemies. Their hearts must be full of compassion and not hate; freely they must seek the lost and lead them to the light. In this way the knowledge and love of God would be spread abroad. But the day was postponed because the Jews refused to take up their task. Hate and the desire for vengeance made them unfit for service. While they dreamed of a greater kingdom of David, the Kingdom of God could not come.

#### A STORY WITH A BARB

The author of The Book of Jonah wrote to shake his people out of their narrowness and blindness. He clothed his message in a story: the story of the prophet Jonah, who was a man strangely like themselves.

Jonah was a devout man. But, like many of his fellow countrymen, he cherished the hope that at some future day God would destroy all the enemies of Israel. Thus, when God called him to go and preach repentance to the city of Nineveh, capital of the Assyrian Empire, he refused. He would have been only too happy to call down the judgment of God upon them. But he did not wish to warn the people of Nineveh of the wrath of God. They might listen to him and repent of their evil ways, and then God, in his mercy, would forgive them. Jonah could not bear to think that these enemies of Israel, a violent, barbaric people who had brought much suffering to the people of God, might escape their just punishment. He had no desire to see them repent and reform, but wished only to see them annihilated.

So Jonah fled from the Lord and took a ship to go as far away from Nineveh as possible. But the Lord raised a great storm on the sea, and it threatened to swamp the boat. It was quickly discovered that Jonah was responsible for the critical situation. He admitted his fault and offered to let the sailors throw him overboard, and thus save themselves. This the pagan seamen were not willing to do, but risked their lives to save his. The efforts of the sailors, however, were unavailing, and Jonah was thrown into the sea. He was miraculously delivered by God and set safely on dry land.

Again he heard God's command to go to Nineveh. This time he went. But even while he was warning the people of Nineveh of their impending doom, he felt no concern for them. He had no sympathy with the men, women, and children whom he addressed. They were not children of God, but vile Ninevites, fit only for destruction. With a certain satisfaction he warned: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (ch. 3: 4). While he spoke he hoped that none would heed—and then the wrath of God would fall.

But the people heard and repented. The king proclaimed a fast, and all the people wore sackcloth and ashes, from the greatest of them to the least. Even the cattle were decked with signs of mourning. The consternation of Jonah at this turn of events can hardly be described. In a fury, he withdrew to the outskirts of the city and waited there to see what would happen. At the end of forty days, the city was not destroyed. Jonah realized bitterly that his original suspicions had been confirmed, that he had been duped. The Ninevites had been saved through his efforts. Angrily Jonah demanded of God that either he should destroy the city as he had promised or he should take the prophet's life, because it was more than he could bear.

Once again God tried to teach Jonah the meaning of mercy. While Jonah sat outside the city, God caused a plant to grow up next to him and shade his head from the heat of the sun. The next day, however, God sent a worm to destroy the plant. Jonah, who had enjoyed the shade of the plant, was now prostrated by the heat. When he revived, he demanded that God take his life from him, because he could not bear the heat. He thought wistfully of the withered plant which had protected him when it was alive. Then the Lord pointed out to him the lesson of what had happened:

"You had pity on the plant for which you did not labor....

Why should I not spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand people, . . . and also much cattle?" \* (ch. 4:10, 11).

Then he left Jonah—and the readers of The Book of Jonah—to ponder that question.

#### JONAH'S MESSAGE FOR TODAY

It is perhaps fitting that no reply is recorded, for the question has not yet been answered by the world. The Jew, instructed to bring Gentiles to the knowledge of God; the

Christian, admonished to love all men as his brothers—who can say that these have learned to care for their enemies as God cares for them? To a world that has supported the narrowest theories of race and nationality and looked on with indifference while whole peoples were condemned to a sub-human place in society, this story of the prophet Jonah declares the judgment of God. For a world that has never achieved a peaceful community but has remained hostile, divided, warring with itself, the book is urgent, essential teaching.

**HOW TO READ JONAH.** Read this book straight through, and at your first reading omit ch. 2: 2-9. Note the touches of humor in God's dealings with Jonah, particularly in the last paragraph, where God chides Jonah for his anger.

#### THE BOOK OF MICAH

Micah the Morashite was a younger contemporary of Hosea and Isaiah. His prophecies are dated in the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (toward the end of the eighth century and the beginning of the seventh century B.C.). It is possible that his ministry extended also into the reign of the infamous Manasseh, to judge from the content of some of his prophecies.

Micah was a native of Moresheth-gath, a small town in southern Judah, near the Philistine border. Close by were all the cities with which he was most concerned. The great highway along which marched the armies of the Assyrians and Egyptians was not far to the west. Jerusalem, "the gate of my people" (ch. 1: 9), was only about twenty miles to the northeast. The barren countryside of Tekoa, from which Amos came, lay about seventeen miles to the east.

The land surrounding Moresheth-gath was rich and red. The soil held the best of Judah's vineyards and offered up heavy harvests to the farmer. The area was equally rich in

history. Here was the valley of Adullam, where David hid from Saul's anger. Not far away was the valley of Elah, where he slew the Philistine champion Goliath.

Micah early sensed the troubles of his people. The down-trodden peasants were victims of the wealthy landowners who owned and controlled, not only the land, but the very people who worked it. All were dependent upon the lords of the land for food, for work, for homes, almost for life itself. Micah pictured this country nobility feeding upon the flesh of his people. It was a situation with which he, being country-bred, was most familiar. Yet, with prophetic wisdom, he understood that what was happening in the country must also be true of the city. For if the nobles and princes were corrupt in the land, they were not likely to be less corrupt in the cities that bred them.

To Micah, it was impossible for a true prophet to know these things and not speak. Only the false prophets spoke words of comfort to a wealthy and irresponsible aristocracy. The honest prophet, with no concern for his own material well-being, uttered true warnings of the Lord's wrath and exposed evil where he found it.

#### A MESSAGE OF JUDGMENT AND OF HOPE

Beginning first with a general prophecy against Israel and Judah, Micah became increasingly specific in his accusations. He turned to the cities of the south, and, using varieties of wordplay almost impossible to translate, sang a dirge for them. Micah could play on the meaning of these names very neatly. "Weep tears at Teartown (Bochim)," he says, "Grovel in dust at Dust-town (Beth-le-aphrah)." (This play upon the meanings of words is characteristic of Micah, appearing again in the final verses in connection with his own name, which means literally, "Who is like the Lord?") Then he turned on the rich oppressors, foretelling a day when they

themselves would be oppressed and promising the downfall of priests, princes, and false prophets alike.

Nevertheless, the prophet did not always proclaim a stern, unrelenting message of doom. Micah loved the poor and defended their cause. He had a message for them too. For their future he sketched a happy picture: a land united and honored among its neighbors. He foresaw a day when many nations would come and say:

"Come, let us go up to the mount of the Lord, . . .  
That he may instruct us in his ways" \* (ch. 4: 2).

He spoke of a time when the Lord would judge the nations, when swords would be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, and when all righteous men would sit "each under his vine and under his fig tree, with none to frighten them" \* (ch. 4: 4). Isaiah, who delivered his prophecies in the same period, also used these beautiful words concerning Israel's future (Isa. 2: 2-4). Perhaps both prophets learned them from one who had gone before them.

Micah continued his message with the promise of the Lord that, in a day yet to come, he would gather to himself the lame, the afflicted, and the outcast. And he would set as ruler over Israel one of their own, a man of the land. Out of Ephratah, the least of the clans of Judah, would come forth a Shepherd who would "feed his flock in the strength of the Lord." \* Thus did Micah speak of the coming of the Messiah, of the Chosen Servant of God, his Anointed One, who would establish his Kingdom on earth. The prophet characterized this One who should come, not as a mighty prince or a general of armies, but as a humble person, revered for his goodness and mercy. In this description, Christians see, as they do in the teaching of the unknown prophet of the Exile (Second Isaiah) concerning the Servant of God, a finger pointing to One who fulfilled these hopes in his life and in his work.

With the end of this message of hope, there is a dramatic change. Suddenly we hear the God of Israel, and his people in a heated exchange of questions and answers. The Lord pleads his case before the bar of judgment: "My people, what have I done to you that you have requited me thus?" \* Following this there is a sharp reminder of his "righteous deeds" for their sake, how he has brought them out of the land of bondage and established them free and strong in the Promised Land, delivered them from their enemies, and given them of the riches of the earth.

The people acknowledge the truth of the charge and seek to make amends. But how? How shall they come before Yahweh? Shall they come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with rivers of oil? Shall they give their first-born for their transgression, the fruit of their body for the sin of their soul? (ch. 6: 6, 7). The prophet, in his answer, fixes in a sentence the essence of the religion of Israel:

"He hath showed thee, O man, what is good;  
And what doth the Lord require of thee,  
But to do justly, and to love mercy,  
And to walk humbly with thy God?" (ch. 6:8).

#### HOW TO RECOGNIZE A PROPHET

Micah, like his great contemporaries, Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah, saw the true situation of his nation. We think today: Why did not the people of Judah and Israel believe four such great prophets? The difficulty is that a prophet does not always seem like one in his own time. The reaction of a typical Israelite to these men might have been: "God's messengers? Prophets? Nonsense. Of course, if they *were* prophets we would listen, but they are not. Who is this Amos? An ignorant shepherd from out in the country somewhere, talking about things that aren't his business. As for Hosea, I feel

sorry for him, but his sad experience has affected his mind. Isaiah is a fine public speaker, but he's eccentric. Nobody who goes around acting as he does can have much judgment. His notions about foreign policy are absolutely foolish. And this Micah—well, you know how country people are, they always condemn everything in the big city. What would anybody from Moresheth-gath know about the future of our country or the world? Prophets? Indeed!"

Nevertheless, Micah was a true prophet. Not simply because he "hit it right" about Jerusalem, which was indeed plowed like a field, as he had said, but because he expressed the mind of God. There is more in Micah than criticism of things as they are. He draws an inspired picture of things as they ought to be, and as they will be. It is a picture of a people secure in their land, no longer torn by constant wars, nor worn down by toil for the enrichment of others.

These things shall be, says the prophet; but he sets no date for them. The expression "latter days" points to the goal of history. Micah shows why, even today, we have not reached this goal. World peace comes only with world obedience to God's laws. Walking in his paths comes before beating swords into plowshares.

HOW TO READ MICAH. The three passages you must not miss are ch. 4: 1-5, the promise of peace; ch. 5: 2-4, the Prince of Peace to be born at Bethlehem; ch. 6: 1-8, what God requires of man. The sins of the time, many of which are the same as in our own time, can be seen in chs. 2: 1, 2; 3: 1-3; 3: 9-11; 5: 12, 13; 6: 10-12; 7: 1-6. Micah's essential and basic faith in God is seen in the closing sections, ch. 7: 7-13, a cry of repentance and faith, and ch. 7: 14-20, a declaration of God's forgiveness to those who repent.

## nahum :habakkuk :zephaniah

**N**HE prophet of doom is not always unwelcome if the doom is for someone other than ourselves. To the unhappy people of Judah, bowed under the yoke of Assyrian rule, Nahum the Elkoshite must have appeared as an avenging angel, a messenger of the Lord, bearing fiery promises of destruction. For he prophesied not the fall of Judah, but of Nineveh, the capital of the hated Assyrian Empire.

### THE BOOK OF NAHUM

In vivid poetry, Nahum proclaims to his people that God is just. He will yet free them from the brutal oppressor. With increasing eloquence, Nahum pictures the battle scenes as though they were already taking place. The chariots darting to and fro, men stumbling in the haste of warfare, the gates opening, the palace "melting away," the city plundered and ruined—all these he portrays with dramatic vigor in powerful verse.

The mood changes. Now the poet reminds Nineveh of her sin. She is like a harlot and shall have a harlot's end. She is like Thebes in Egypt, which the Assyrians had sacked a few years earlier. Like Thebes shall Nineveh be sacked. He warns the city to prepare for the siege. He likens her people to the locust swarm, which settles in a hedge in the cool of the day, only to scatter and be seen no more with the rising of the sun. Finally, he closes by reminding the Assyrian king that there will be no one to help him or to gather in his

people, "for against whom has not your malice continually gone forth?" \* (Nahum 3: 19). Here is the eternal fate of the fallen oppressor.

Assyria was the nation nobody loved. No matter how powerful a country may be, if its power is used only to enslave smaller countries it builds up a great force of hatred and revenge that will in time sweep back upon it and destroy it. So it was with Assyria; so with Persia later on; so with Napoleon and Hitler in recent times; so will it always be. "They that take the sword shall perish with the sword." A nation whose foreign policy is written by its army, as Assyria's was, is a nation that writes its own death sentence.

With the mention of the sack of Nineveh, Nahum himself points to the time of his prophecy. Although he may have proclaimed it during the first and unsuccessful siege of Nineveh in 623 B.C., it is more likely that the prophecy was given just before the final siege and fall of the city in 612 B.C.

The vivid quality of the descriptions has suggested to some people that the prophecy should be dated immediately after the fall of Nineveh rather than before. Aside from denying the true prophetic mission of Nahum, such a statement implies an imperfect knowledge of his book. Who can read the brilliant metaphors, the vivid phrasing, and yet believe the poet-prophet Nahum incapable of imagination! Surely a man inspired by the Lord with a message of hope as well as of vengeance must have written these words.

The book falls into two sections. Chapter 1 is a paean of praise to the Lord, describing his majesty and might. It is interesting to note that in the original Hebrew this section contains what is known as an alphabetical psalm. The first line of the song (ch. 1: 2) begins with "aleph," the Hebrew equivalent of our "a"; the next verse contains three "beth's," or "b's"; and so on for the first fifteen letters (as far as v. 10).

Nahum's prophecy signaled the end of an era. The As-

syrian Empire, stretching across the whole Near East, from the Nile to the mountains of Armenia, from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean, began to lose its mighty strength. A century earlier Isaiah had called Assyria "the rod of God's anger," \* appointed to humble the pride of Israel and Judah that they might learn repentance, but even Isaiah had seen that one day its cruelty, irresponsibility, and God-defying lust for power would bring the Assyrian Empire to its ruin.

In 612 B.C., Nineveh, the royal city of the Assyrian kings, from whose gate had marched the armies of conquest to invade, sack, and raze, into whose palaces and temples had passed the tribute of the conquered, was crushed and burned to the ground; her proud people were put to the sword. The world's greatest and most powerful empire could not escape the judgment of God.

**HOW TO READ NAHUM.** When you read this book, keep the main thought in mind: God executes judgment on every form of human wickedness. Do not expect to find any wide range of teaching. Nahum's mind was concentrated on this one point.

#### THE BOOK OF HABAKKUK

When you are puzzled and upset because everything seems to be going wrong in the world, turn to The Book of Habakkuk. Here was a man for whom faith in God was not easy. He has been called the prophet who dared to ask questions.

All around him the prophet Habakkuk saw the unequal ways of the world. Evil men prospered, good men suffered. The selfish, ungodly merchant went unpunished. The poor God-fearing fisherman became ever poorer and more down-trodden. Princes and aristocrats dispossessed the people of the land to enlarge their own vast holdings. The farmer and peasant, unable to support themselves, were reduced to poverty, and many persons were sold as slaves.

Habakkuk knew that ultimate responsibility for this state of affairs lay with God, the almighty sovereign of the world. At the same time, the prophet was convinced, from the history of God's dealings with his people, that he was just and merciful and loved his faithful children. How could the facts of inequality and injustice in the world be reconciled with the belief that the all-powerful God was good and just in his actions? This problem tormented the prophet, as it has tormented believers in every age. If God be God, how can wickedness succeed and the righteous receive only poverty and humiliation?

"How long," he exclaimed, "O Lord, have I cried out, and thou dost not hear!" \* Why, he demanded, did God show him the misfortunes of his people: the brazen success of the wicked in undermining the law, the collapse of justice, and the oppression of the faithful? Why did God permit these things, and do nothing about them?

Habakkuk lived at a time when the troubles of his people were at a peak. Although the Assyrian Empire had fallen, the Babylonians had risen to take its place, and were increasingly a menace in the world. Within Judah the political situation was chaotic. Habakkuk prophesied during the reign of Jehoiakim (608-597 B.C.), a selfish tyrant who oppressed his people. He drained his country of its wealth, not only to pay the heavy tribute exacted by the conqueror, but more to maintain his own household in Oriental splendor. With the immorality and corruption of the court as examples, and led by the nobles of the land, the nation rapidly turned to all the evil ways that had been outlawed under the reforms of the good king Josiah.

To the prophet, traveling throughout the land observing and sharing the troubles of the people, the luxurious life at Jerusalem was not only incomprehensible, but utterly intolerable. Certainly he had cause to cry out, "The law is

paralyzed, . . . judgment goes forth twisted" \* (ch. 1: 4). Yet even to the puzzled, angry complainer, the punishment to be meted out by God seemed overly harsh. The Babylonians, that "fierce and impetuous nation," \* would march down upon Judah and destroy her. They were the instrument of the Lord, carrying out his will; but they would not distinguish between just and unjust, and would kill and enslave all.

Again the prophet sought an answer to his question: Why should the good man suffer for the sins of the wicked? He envisioned himself standing upon a watchtower overlooking the world, watching and waiting for his Lord to speak. God, when he spoke at last, offered him, not an absolute promise for the future, but this encouragement: the fate of the wicked is determined, "but the righteous shall live by his faithfulness" \* (ch. 2: 4).

There are two kinds of life. One is the life of pride, the crooked, hollow life; the other is the life of faith. The wicked man is the man of pride; he is the hollow man, the crooked man. The just man, the man whose life endures, is the man of faithfulness. Man does not live by prosperity; he lives by faithfulness to God. Nations do not stand or fall according to the strength of their armies; nations, like men, live by their faithfulness.

The assurance that the prophet found has been shared by the faithful through the ages. By holding fast to their faith in God, by remaining steadfast in his ways, the righteous find life. Centuries later, the Apostle Paul quoted these words as expressing the doctrine of justification by faith: that the sinner is forgiven his sins and redeemed by God through his faith.

The prophet's vision continued with a description of the punishment of the unfaithful, the false in heart, and the idolaters. The prophet asked them:

"Of what use are your graven images,  
Your idols which you make for yourselves?  
Can you make the dumb wood speak? or this  
piece of metal move?" \* (ch. 2:18).

With contempt he spoke of the foolish people who would not respond to the living God of heaven and earth, but bowed down in worship before sticks and stones. He pleaded with them:

"The Lord is in his holy temple;  
Let all the earth keep silence before him"  
(ch. 2: 20).

These familiar but striking words now form a regular part of the church service. Most worshipers, however, think it is only a warning to be quiet in church, whereas it is a command to the world to cease chasing after false gods, praising and adoring them, and to bow in reverence before the Lord, acknowledging him to be the only true God.

#### A PSALM OF FAITH

In the concluding section of the book the prophet presents a psalm, arranged with musical notations and apparently prepared for some special religious occasion. The poem differs somewhat in style and in its picturization of God from what has gone before. It has been suggested that this psalm is not original with the prophet, but comes from much earlier times. The language and structure of the psalm are very much like that of the most ancient Hebrew poetry (i.e., The Song of Deborah, Judg., ch. 5; The Blessing of Moses, Deut., ch. 33; Ps. 68), and it has many literary points in common with the older pre-Israelite hymns of Canaan. The substance of the poem is, therefore, of great antiquity, derived in part from a psalm in praise of Yahweh, the God of

nature. Another part may originally have been composed in honor of the chief god of Canaanite mythology and the host of lesser gods who followed in his train. When this part was adapted to Israelite worship, it was completely purged of all its polytheistic features, and only traces of the mythological background survive. Habakkuk borrowed these ancient pieces, editing them slightly, and then added a final stanza of his own, affirming his faith in the Lord.

The song itself is powerfully dramatic. For the writer, God is everywhere to be seen in the catastrophic violence of nature. At the sound of his voice, at the gesture of his arm, the sky is split open, the earth quakes, and the sea writhes in anguish. His power is manifest in the terror of the storm and the furious driving of the winds. At his command, plague and pestilence go forth through the earth. Thus God destroys his enemies and the enemies of his chosen people.

The prophet was almost overwhelmed by the sense of God's power and dominion. In his own words:

"I heard, and my body trembled;  
My lips quivered at the voice" \* (ch. 3:16).

In a passion of repentance he vowed to wait patiently for the day when oppression would be lifted from his people. At last he understood fully that God would choose a fitting time to show his justice. Though that time might not yet be near, Habakkuk trusted in the wisdom of his Lord. Whatever trouble befell—though the trees and the vines failed to yield their fruit, though the stalls were empty of cattle, though the land was barren of food—still he would rejoice in the Lord.

"As for me, I will rejoice in the Lord,  
I will exult in the God of my salvation" \*  
(ch. 3: 18).

The man of faith does not obey God only when his crops are good, his barns are filled, and all the land is at peace. The man of faith is so confident in God and his final victory that he rejoices in God *now*.

**HOW TO READ HABAKKUK.** No special help is needed for the reader of this little book, if it is kept in mind that we have a combination of three things: (1) the prophet's debate with God (chs. 1: 1 to 2: 4); (2) a fragment from one of Habakkuk's sermons (ch. 2: 5-20); (3) a psalm of faith and triumph, perhaps a very old one which Habakkuk rewrote and enlarged.

#### THE BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH

The writings of the prophets reflect markedly different personalities, and there is a great variety in their background and training. They came from every level of society. Some were country-born and village-bred, others grew up in the atmosphere of the great city. Amos was a shepherd; Ezekiel, a Jerusalem priest. Micah was a village rustic; his great fellow prophet Isaiah, a city dweller with free access to the king. Jeremiah grew to manhood in a suburb of the capital. About the others we can only guess; but Zephaniah seems to have been a prince of the royal house. His lineage is traced to his great-great-grandfather, Hezekiah; it is at least probable that this was the king who reigned over Judah 721-693 B.C.

Reared in Jerusalem, with all the care and instruction generally accorded a member of the royal household, Zephaniah would have little contact and less understanding of the ordinary people of the land. In the service of the Lord, however, he came to know the truth not only about his own class, but also about the poor and disinherited in Judah. The rich and mighty were already lost in their sins, but for the poor and downtrodden there was hope. Therefore it was

to these, the righteous remnant, that the prophet appealed.

Zephaniah prophesied in the early part of King Josiah's reign. The youthful king was not yet ready to attack the evil conditions he inherited from his idolatrous father, Amon, and more infamous grandfather, Manasseh. It was not until 621 B.C., when the lawbook was discovered in the Temple, that Josiah was able to rally the people behind a drastic reform movement. In the meantime, there were many politicians and priests from the previous reign who continued to control the moral and religious habits of the nation. In such a time, it was most fitting that the prophet of God should bring word of the approaching day of judgment.

Zephaniah was much concerned for the fate of his people. In sober, somber phrases he described the devastation to be wrought by God in his anger. Everything would be destroyed—the earth and all its creatures, birds, fish, animals, as well as mankind. The prophet pictured the terrifying events of the day of the Lord, its awesome violence and utter desolation. Then followed the tragic, fateful words of warning:

"Close at hand is the great day of the Lord,  
Close at hand, and making great haste.  
A day of wrath is that day,  
A day of trouble and distress,  
A day of waste and desolation,  
A day of darkness and deep darkness" \*  
(ch. 1: 14, 15).

These lines have had a powerful hold upon the minds of all generations of believers. Early Christians enshrined them in a Latin hymn, the majestic "Dies irae! dies illa!" Rendered into English, it is the well-known

"Day of wrath! O Day of mourning!  
See fulfill'd the prophets' warning."

Having warned the people of Judah, the prophet then turned to the neighboring nations. None would escape, he repeated; none would escape the righteous wrath of God. Philistia was to be laid waste. Moab would be as Sodom, and Ammon as Gomorrah, a desolation forever. Ethiopia and Assyria were also doomed. The warnings of Zephaniah had an urgent sound. He knew that the day was at hand. He did not plead with the nations to turn from their way, for he was certain of their fate.

Judgment, however, was not the full message of the prophet. Even this herald of woe offered a word of comfort and encouragement to his people, promising them hope for the future. On the awful day of judgment, a remnant would be saved. The meek and truly repentant would be hidden from danger on that day. From the humble and afflicted a handful would be chosen. For them the Lord would build a new Zion, a new Jerusalem. The last chapter of Zephaniah's prophecy is a song of triumph, describing the happy state of these survivors. The Lord would be their defender, smiting the oppressor and restoring their fortune before their eyes. He would make them renowned and praised among the peoples of the earth.

To the people of Judah, to the people of the world, Zephaniah declared in the name of the Lord: The judgment will come and will fall with vehement force upon all, upon Jew and Gentile, upon just and unjust, upon believer and idolater. All men, all peoples, will answer for their deeds. From all these only the faithful, the humble, the repentant will be saved.

**HOW TO READ ZEPHANIAH.** Read this book straight through. Look for the sins that he finds most serious; see *why* God judges men, and *how*, and what are the features of the Golden Age.

## haggai : zechariah : malachi

**W**HEN the first small groups of exiles started back to Jerusalem from Babylonia in 538 B.C., their first thought was to rebuild the Temple. But they made little progress in this, and within three years their efforts had ceased entirely while they devoted more and more time to their own affairs, building great houses for themselves, enlarging their herds, expanding their businesses. In all this bustle of activity they neglected the house of the Lord, and in their minds there was little sense of obligation to the God who had brought them safely back to their homes. Fifteen years passed during which no effort was made to complete the work on the Temple. It was at a standstill until, in 520 B.C., the community was roused afresh by a prophet who appeared in Judah bearing a message from God to his people.

### THE BOOK OF HAGGAI

The book that bears the name of Haggai tells us little of the man himself; it is, rather, the record of his utterances on rebuilding the Temple. He notes precisely the date of each of his prophecies, and its essential contents. Although he himself delivered the messages, they are recorded in the third person perhaps by a secretary or scribe.

Late in the summer of 520 B.C., Haggai came before the people. He criticized them fearlessly for their selfish concern with their own homes while the house of the Lord lay half finished through the years. He told them that the poor

returns from their business and farming ventures were a punishment from the Lord. Because they begrudged Him his rightful share in their produce he would withhold his blessings from them, and thus they would lose by their miserliness.

So effective was Haggai's indictment that the people started work on the Temple almost immediately. About a month later he spoke again, but this time his words carried an entirely different flavor. While the building was in progress, Haggai brought messages of encouragement to the workers. He answered those who complained that the new Temple was plain and humble compared to the former one, telling them that one day the second Temple would far outshine the old one in splendor and riches.

Haggai knew the importance of building the Temple. If a community has lovely homes and a shabby church, or none, it is a sign of cheap and bad ideas of religion. A church building is a reminder of God, a symbol of the invisible realities of faith. Day and night it stands as a witness to all that there are people in the community who have faith in God.

Two months later Haggai spoke again, adding to the first prophecy certain explanations. Apparently there had been complaints that the fortunes of the people had not notably improved since their renewed building efforts. The prophet, however, refused to let them lose heart.

In a series of questions and answers he showed them that because they had been unclean—because they had not been faithful—their work had not been found worthy in the sight of the Lord. Nevertheless, from that day forward the Lord would bless all their work.

On the same day Haggai prophesied again. The Lord had sent a message for Zerubbabel, a descendant of David, the governor of Judah. In the coming judgment, when God

would shake the nations and overthrow their kingdoms, he planned to establish Zerubbabel in Judah—to make him "like a seal ring." \*

Of the results of this final prophecy there are no records. As so often happens, the details are lost in the dark pages of history. Perhaps an effort was made to restore the Kingdom of Judah and crown Zerubbabel king. If that be true, the attempt ended in failure, for the Persians remained masters of Palestine. Perhaps the words refer to some less drastic proposal—in any event, we hear no more of Zerubbabel. The rest of Haggai's work was certainly successful. In 515 B.C., four years after Haggai had aroused his people to return to their building, the second Temple was complete. Once more the Lord's house was standing in Jerusalem—and once more his people gathered at the sacred place to worship him.

**HOW TO READ HAGGAI.** Before reading The Book of Haggai, turn to The Book of Ezra and read chs. 1; 3 to 6, which give a description of the events which form the background for the work of Haggai and Zechariah.

#### THE BOOK OF ZECHARIAH

By edict of Cyrus, king of Persia, the first exiles returned to Jerusalem in 538 B.C. They soon discovered that the task of rebuilding the Lord's house was not an easy one. Leaders and workmen were all too willing to give up at the slightest difficulty. Having once set about the important work, they were in constant need of encouragement and exhortation. When neighboring countries demanded by what right the construction was taken up again, the Jews were ready to halt operations until the matter could be settled by judicial inquiry into the official decrees. This involved a lengthy trip to Babylon and endless red tape. It seemed that the Temple might never be completed.

In the year 520 B.C., the immediate necessity of having a central sanctuary where all the Jews could gather to worship their God, was recognized, as we have seen, by the prophet Haggai. He had done his part well, haranguing, threatening, promising, blessing the weakhearted workers. Now he was to have assistance in his mission.

Within two months after Haggai's prophecies concerning the rebuilding of the Temple the prophet Zechariah began his ministry. Although the basic purpose of the two prophets was the same, two men more unlike could hardly be imagined. Haggai was precise, matter-of-fact, intensely practical. Zechariah was a mystic who saw visions and spoke in obscure and figurative language. In a series of visions, the word of the Lord was revealed to Zechariah. In describing his visions to the people, he emphasized the fundamental message for the day: the first thing was to rebuild the Temple. Everything else could wait. The Temple would express to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews the unity of the chosen people in their worship and in their faith. It would show that their trust in God was stronger than their fear of the surrounding peoples and stronger than their own selfish interests.

We are told by Ezra (Ezra 6: 14) that the building prospered through the efforts of Haggai and Zechariah. We can guess how completely absorbed these two were in the work, for, although they carefully recorded their prophecies, they never mentioned each other in their books. It is only from the later historian that we know they worked side by side.

#### ZECHARIAH'S VISIONS

In the first six chapters of his book, Zechariah presented eight visions. In each an angel of the Lord was his guide and interpreter. As the prophet watched, he saw first a large group of variously colored horses. The angel explained that

they had just traveled over the whole earth searching for signs of unrest and had found none. This little tale carried a very serious message to the people of Judah. It was a painful blow to those who had hoped to re-establish the Kingdom of Judah. There had been rumors of troubles and uprisings in the Persian Empire. The revolutionaries in Judah thought that so long as the Persian king was occupied with these troubles, he would have neither time nor men to suppress a rebellion in a distant colony like theirs.

Stating the interpretation carefully, Zechariah left little doubt in the minds of his hearers about the hopelessness of revolt. Having thus cautioned against immediate violent action to gain freedom and establish an independent state, Zechariah assured them, nevertheless, of the continued blessings of God, and promised that He would one day fulfill their greatest expectations.

All eight of these colorful prophecies, each centered in a strange vision, were delivered at the same time. Two years later the prophet spoke again. Some of the people had inquired of the priests whether they should continue to fast and mourn on the anniversary of the destruction of the first Temple. The priests were apparently unable to settle the matter, and it was left undecided until word came to Zechariah "by the hand of the Lord." God is not specially interested in such things, he said. Annual repentance, fixed by convention, is of no concern to God. As the prophets before the Exile had said, so Zechariah repeated:

"Judge with true judgment, and practice loyalty and mercy each toward his brother. Do not oppress the widow, or the orphan, the alien resident, or the poor" \* (ch. 7: 9, 10).

What really interests God is not merely what goes on in our church services, but also what goes on outside the church walls in our everyday lives.

## THE PRESENCE OF THE LORD

The prophet closed his work with words of comfort and promise. For the little band of returned exiles, struggling to rebuild their city and their Temple, he drew a bright picture of the future. Jerusalem would not always be a barren, half-deserted ruin. Other exiles would shortly be released. The city streets would once again ring with the laughter of boys and girls at play. The whole land would prosper under the blessings of the Lord. The other nations would learn that Yahweh was a great and powerful God. Strangers would make pilgrimages to Jerusalem, and many would ask to walk with the Jews because they had heard that God was with them.

This was the clue to their triumph: the presence of the Lord in Jerusalem. In former times the Jews had nourished hopes that, in the return, God would reconstitute their kingdom and destroy all their enemies. They expected that one day the kingdom of David would be restored, with David's son upon the throne. Here, however, the prophet suggested that the victory of the Jews would be something quite different. Their prowess would not be military but spiritual; they would conquer, not by force of arms, but through the name of their God. Mighty nations would send kings and ambassadors to seek out the God of the Jews, and the whole world would follow this people, not because it was mighty in power, but because it was blessed with the presence of the Lord.

## THE GLORIOUS FUTURE OF JERUSALEM

The words of Zechariah end with ch. 8. The latter part of the book is of unknown origin and authorship; perhaps it is the work of one man, more likely of two (chs. 9 to 11; 12 to 14). In a general way these chapters continue the message

of Zechariah, and that is possibly why they were attached to his book. They describe the glorious future of Jerusalem. The prophet bids the people rejoice. All their enemies will be defeated. All the nations that mocked the fate of Judah will be destroyed. Jerusalem itself will prosper under the rule of the Messiah, who will establish his peace in the world. Judah and Israel will be restored, a united monarchy as in the days of David and Solomon. The righteous will be vindicated, and there shall be none to make them afraid.

**HOW TO READ ZECHARIAH.** Read chs. 1 to 8, using the books of Ezra and Haggai to give you additional information about the events and conditions of the time.

Chapters 9 to 14, being from a later time and a different prophet, should be read by themselves.

#### THE BOOK OF MALACHI

"It is futile to serve God: And what profit is there in keeping his charge?" (ch. 3: 14). The eternal complaint of God's people sounded again in the land. They kept all God's commands, they said, but the men who flouted his laws prospered. In their poverty they offered sacrifices and brought gifts to the Temple, but the evildoers grew rich. Why should they be concerned any longer with such an unjust God? Why remain righteous if there were no profit in it?

#### ALARMING SYMPTOMS

People were bored and discouraged. They were thoroughly disillusioned and ready to give up their faith.

In the midst of these complaints, a voice was heard. Malachi, the prophet, arose to question the questioners. "If you are so pious," he asked, "why then did you bring to the Temple offerings of such inferior quality?" \* The lame

and misshapen animals, which they would not dare offer to the governor of Judah, were considered a sufficient sacrifice for the Lord. How could they accuse God of injustice, when they were robbing and cheating him of his just due? Through this deception, the falseness of their hearts was revealed. For all their pretense at devotion, their faith was a fraud. They were no better than thieves, abhorrent to God, and condemned by him.

Malachi directed his messages against the hypocrites, the self-righteous. He attacked the indolent and cynical priests, who had long since lost their own faith and were now undermining the faith of the people. So careless were they of the things of God that they no longer even observed the forms of worship.

The prophet heaped scorn upon those shrewd merchants of faith who tried to bargain with God. They were ready to trade sacrifices for divine blessings, and formal observance of the law in return for material rewards and special consideration in the future.

Another alarming symptom of the same breakdown of faith was the increase in mixed marriages, involving men of Judah and pagan women of the surrounding states. This was the situation which Ezra and Nehemiah faced in their time. Malachi lived and spoke in the same period or slightly earlier. If faith was to be kept alive from generation to generation, then it was necessary for men of faith to marry women of faith. The influx of foreign wives presented a double danger. Politically, this large group, of doubtful loyalty, threatened the unity, and thereby the existence, of the state. More important, these pagan idolaters threatened the religious life of Judah. Not only did they bring with them their false gods, and continue to practice their abominable customs, but they taught their husbands and children these things. Ezra proposed drastic legislation compelling

the men of Judah to put away their foreign wives. Although this was approved by the people as a whole, a violent controversy was provoked by the men affected.

Malachi denounced bitterly those men of the community who divorced their own Jewish wives in order to marry young foreign women. Family life was being destroyed, and the consequent effect on the training and religious growth of the children was disastrous. Pagan wives, rearing their families to worship idols, endangered the whole future of Israel and its worship of the true God.

Indifference to religion, discouragement about the future, cynicism, a breaking-up of home life, superstition widespread, lawlessness and social injustice—these are marks both of Malachi's time and of ours. Thus Malachi speaks to us with a certain directness.

#### FOUR REMEDIES FOR NATIONAL WEAKNESS

1. Improve the leadership of the country (ch. 2: 7). Let the priests know the law and teach it.
2. Support the visible Church (ch. 3: 8-10). The visible Church is not the whole of religion any more than the body is the whole of a man. But without a body no one can remain alive in this world. For the same reason religion without a Church cannot survive.
3. Cultivate a better home life (ch. 2: 14-16). For Malachi, this begins with marriages that will last. There can be no hope of better homes so long as no home has much prospect of lasting more than a few years. Malachi suggests that no home is a true home unless children are expected, welcomed, and loved. Further, the most important feature of any family is its relationship to God and its faith in him.
4. Keep the law. According to Malachi, there is nothing wrong with the laws of the nation but with the people who do not obey them. If the nation would live up to the laws it

has, that alone would mark a great improvement.

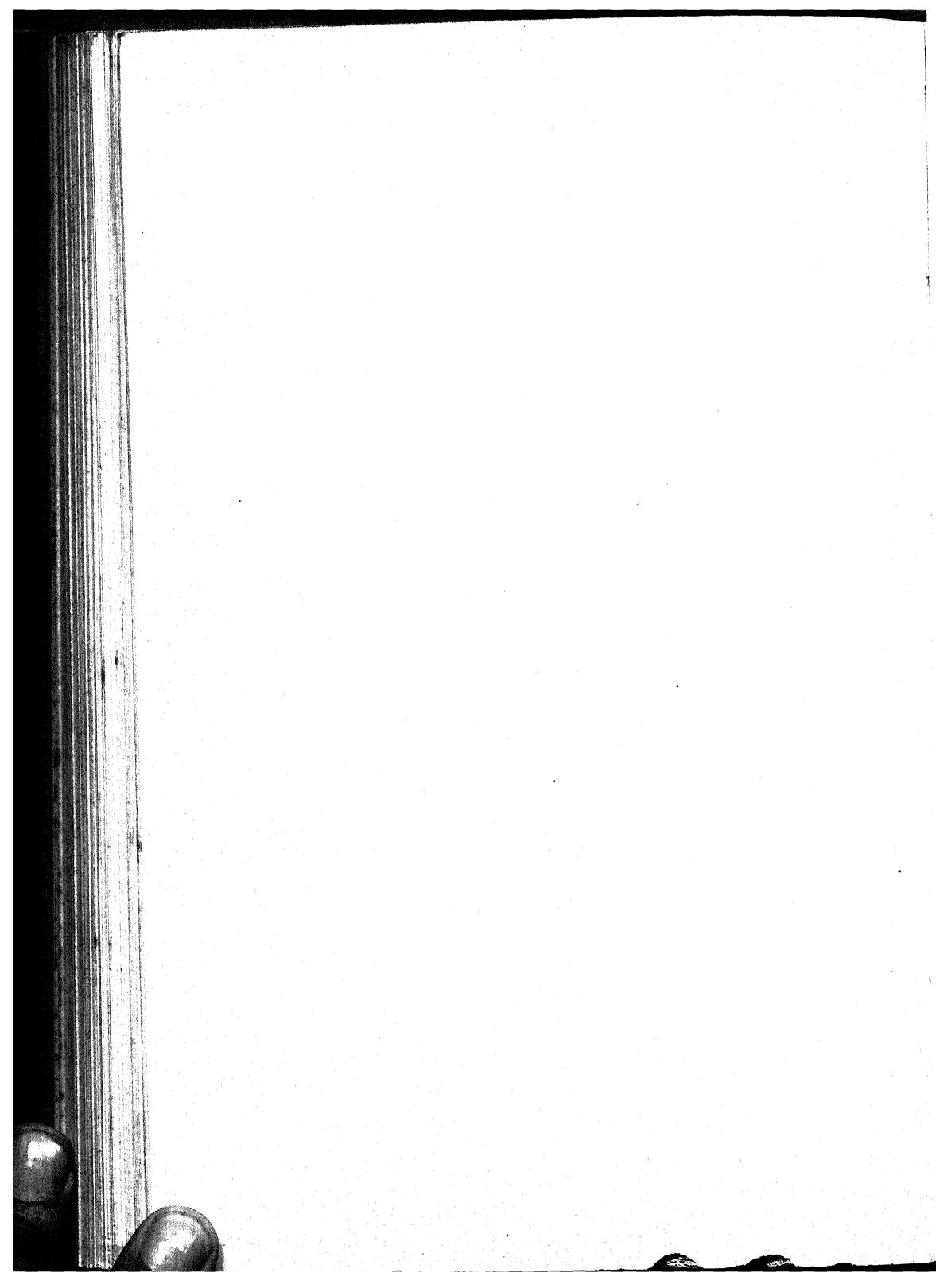
Christian leadership; Christian homes; the Christian Church; a law-respecting, law-abiding community—these make a good foundation for any era. And if men will not heed? Malachi has an answer: Either choose God's will, and live—or else die.

The prophet spoke to his people as an attorney before the bar. When his adversaries complained of the Lord's treatment, he countered with God's complaints against them. When they objected that God did not love them, he recounted the ways in which God had shown his love, from the beginning when he had chosen his people and brought them to freedom. When they despaired of their present unhappy situation, he prophesied of the coming Messiah:

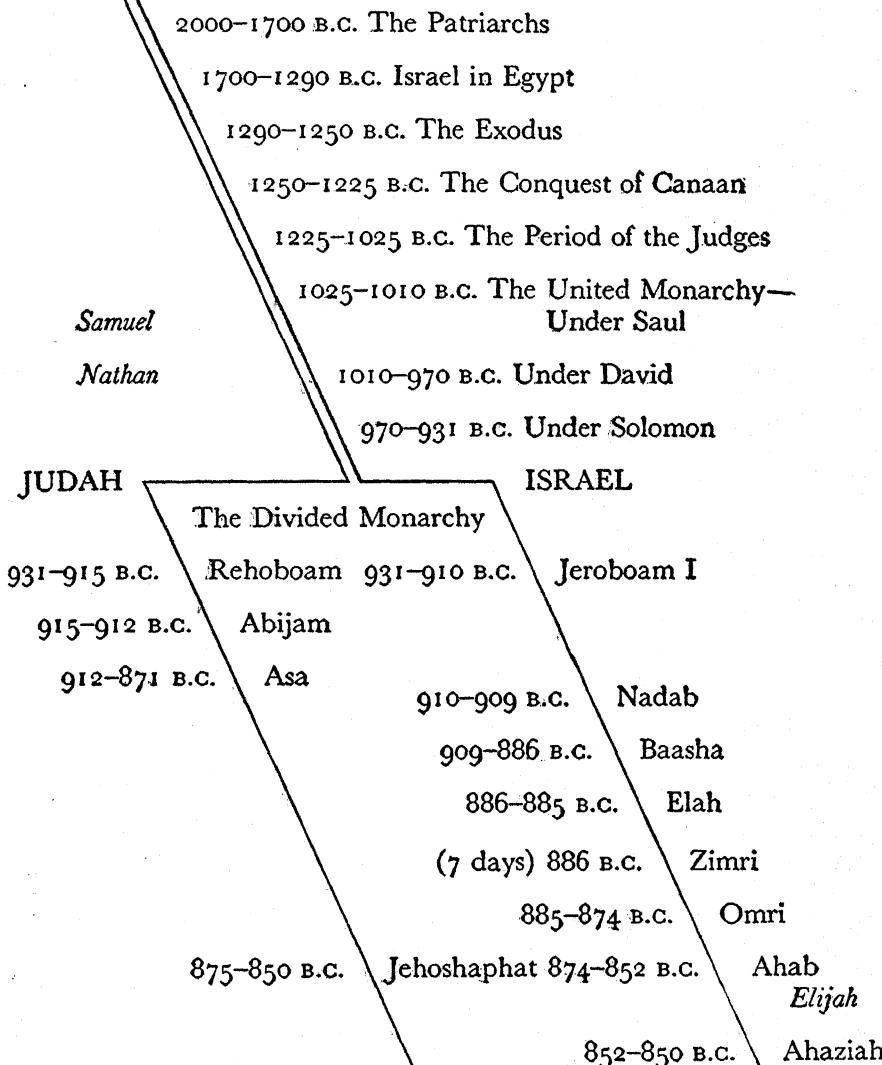
"Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare  
the way before me:  
And suddenly he will come to his temple, the Lord,  
whom you seek,  
And the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire:  
Behold, he comes!  
But who will endure the day of his coming?  
And who will stand when he appears?" \* (ch. 3:1, 2).

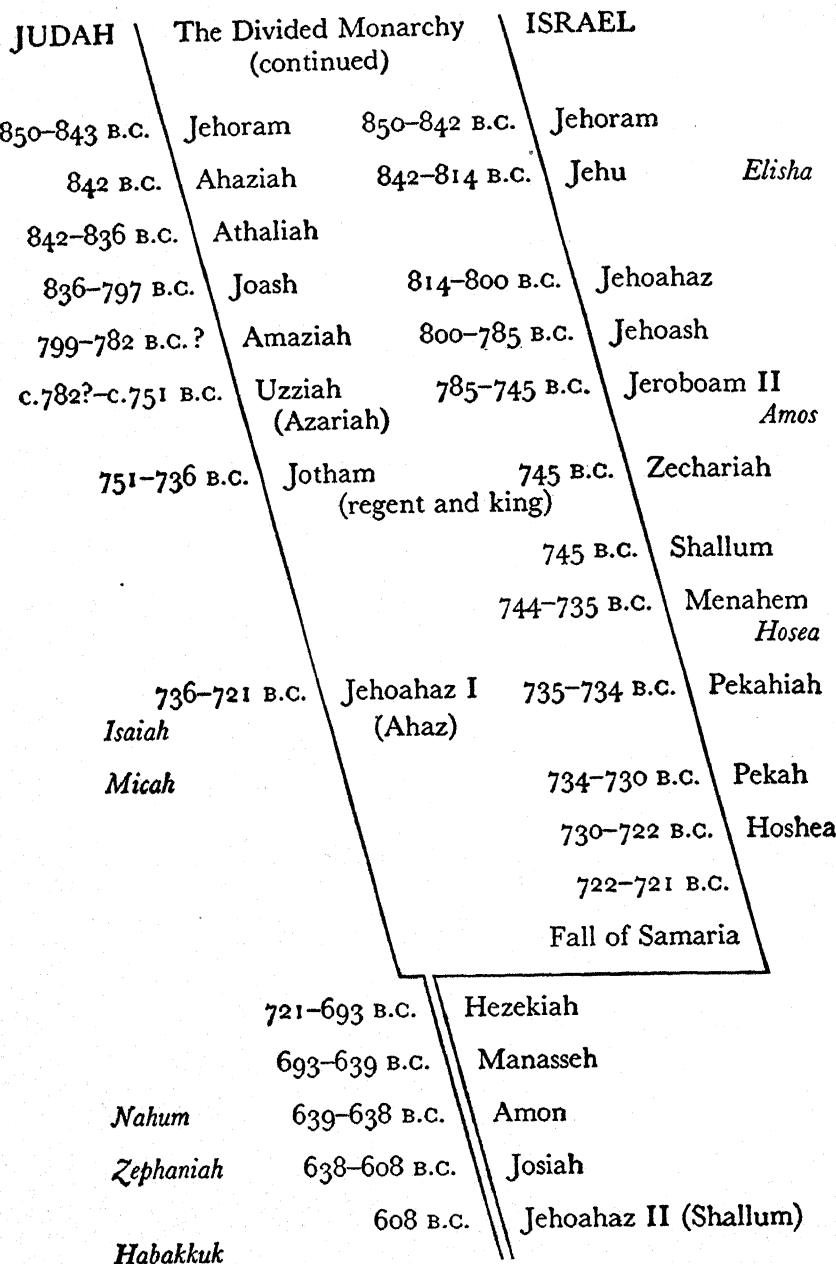
**HOW TO READ MALACHI.** As you read Malachi, make a list of the accusations which he levels against the people of his time. Gradually you will build up a picture of the situation in which the prophet was called to speak.

## old testament chronology



# old testament chronology





608-597 B.C.

Jehoiakim (Eliakim)

*Jeremiah*

597 B.C.

Jehoiachin (Jeconiah)

*Ezekiel*

597-586 B.C.

Zedekiah (Mattaniah)

586 B.C.

Fall of Jerusalem

THE

NATION

IN

EXILE

*Second Isaiah*

*Joel?*

538 B.C.

Return to Jerusalem  
under Zerubbabel

*Haggai, Zechariah* 515 B.C.

Rebuilding of Temple

*Obadiah?*

458 B.C.

Ezra

444 B.C.

Nehemiah

*Malachi*

*Jonah?*

332 B.C. Palestine conquered by Alexander the Great

320 B.C. Judea annexed to Egypt

200 B.C. Judea annexed to Syria

166-163 B.C. The Revolt of the Maccabees